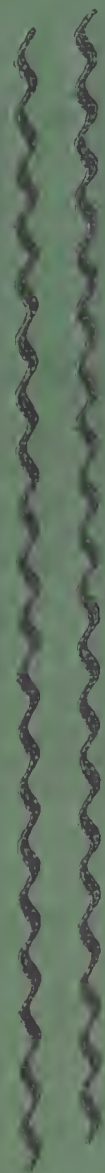


STRINGS to ADVENTURE



Erick Berry



Class PZ7

Book B4617

Copyright N^o St.

Copy 2
COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.





Strings to Adventure

By Erick Berry

GIRLS IN AFRICA

BLACK FOLK TALES

PENNY WHISTLE

HUMBO THE HIPPO AND LITTLE BOY BUMBO

MOM DU JOS

ILLUSTRATIONS OF CYNTHIA

CAREERS OF CYNTHIA

JUMA OF THE HILLS

THE WINGED GIRL OF KNOSSOS

SOJO

THE HOUSE THAT JILL BUILT (ANNE MAXON)

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE



Then followed the sailors with a hornpipe.

Strings to Adventure

by

Erick Berry

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR



Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Company

BOSTON

1935

NEW YORK

Copy 2

PZ7
B4617
St
Copy 2-

Copyright, 1935, by

ALLENA CHAMPLIN BEST

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for inclusion in magazine or newspaper.

Published October, 1935.



PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NOV -2 1935

©CIA

88088

R

PA 1330135

For Rapunzel and her Prince, for the Bear and the Clown, for Mabel and Cedric Head and the Kingsland Marionettes who were the joy and the inspiration of Kitt and Sunny and their adventures.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
<i>Chapter One</i>	THE LETTER 13
<i>Chapter Two</i>	REHEARSAL 19
<i>Chapter Three</i>	THE STRINGS UNWIND 29
<i>Chapter Four</i>	MYSTERY 38
<i>Chapter Five</i>	MYSTERY SOLVED 47
<i>Chapter Six</i>	BARNACLE BILL 54
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	PLANS PROGRESS 61
<i>Chapter Eight</i>	A HAT IN THE WIND 69
<i>Chapter Nine</i>	PROFESSIONALS 77
<i>Chapter Ten</i>	AT CEDARBROOK 88
<i>Chapter Eleven</i>	MORE STRINGS 100
<i>Chapter Twelve</i>	A LOST LETTER 106
<i>Chapter Thirteen</i>	LOW JINKS ACTS 118
<i>Chapter Fourteen</i>	IMPROMPTU 125
<i>Chapter Fifteen</i>	HELP FROM A STAR 138
<i>Chapter Sixteen</i>	THE FAIR 155

CONTENTS

		PAGE
<i>Chapter Seventeen</i>	PUNCH AND JUDY	168
<i>Chapter Eighteen</i>	STRANDED	178
<i>Chapter Nineteen</i>	RECOVERY	185
<i>Chapter Twenty</i>	MISSING MARIONETTES	195
<i>Chapter Twenty-One</i>	GOOD NEWS	203
<i>Chapter Twenty-Two</i>	SUCCESS	212

Strings to Adventure

Chapter One

THE LETTER

KITT was resisting temptation. Certainly, above the address was written "Miss Katherine Newcomb," but below that was also "Miss Catharine Fairweather"—and that was Sunny's name and this was Sunny's house. The envelope, large and imposing and vaguely exciting, lay plainly on the Fairweather hall table; and Sunny wasn't home yet, might not be for another whole hour.

Kitt shifted the large bundle beneath her arm and put out one cold finger to touch the envelope. Conscience, combining with Etiquette and Good Manners, popped up its hydra head and hissed warningly: "You go in and sit down, Katherine my girl. *And don't touch that again till Sunny comes!*"

"Oh, all right, all right!" Kitt murmured soothingly to the trio and scurried into the deserted living room, away from temptation. There a pleasant wood

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

fire blazed. Freed from her raincoat, cozily shut from the rain that tapped wet fingers on the panes, she could spread herself and her sewing. And think about that letter. Wouldn't it be nice if it were Something Unexpected. Something Exciting. Even Something Slightly Remunerative.

A little hopeful song inside her began to hum against the dark and dreary day.

Sunny, as usual, entered with a bounce. "Hi, Kitt! Nobody home? Rotten day, isn't it?" With one sweep of a long arm, she tossed her drenched hat on the table and swung out of her raincoat. Picking up Betsy Ross, whose wide skirts and white cap were selfishly occupying the softest corner of the couch, she sank with a sigh into that historic lady's place. Deliberately Kitt stuck a pin into the epaulet of G. Washington Esquire on her lap and took another from her mouth. "Letter?" she asked innocently, glancing up through the curl that drooped over her brown eyes.

Sunny sprawled in comfort, damp oxfords to the blaze. The letter was in her hand and as she ripped it open she wondered idly: "Who could be writing to both of us? I suppose it's addressed here because we're in the 'phone book, and you're not." Then, neglecting the half-opened letter, "That's grand of the General, Kitt. I like the white yarn hair. Is it an order?"

"You know very well it isn't. And I've just about

THE LETTER

used up the money from those last marionettes for all these new samples. Sunny! Don't torture a gal! If you don't read that letter I'll expire on the spot!"

Sunny grinned and slowly pushed the pins back into her bright, untidy hair. Her eyes were busily scanning the single, businesslike sheet. Suddenly, with a gasp, she sat straight up in her corner and reread it slowly, incredulously. Her eyes were dancing, her color high as she tossed the thing across to Kitt.

"Read it, honey. It's more yours than mine."

How strange her voice sounded! Maybe it was the Something Exciting Kitt wanted so much. Her eyes glanced through it.

"Why—how—how funny! How perfectly absurd!" she said in a little, strangled voice. "Why they must think we're regular professionals." And she read it again, murmuring aloud over the important parts. . . . "And hope, since this is an emergency, that you will be so kind as to help us out. Miss Jaques, of the Liskeard High School has strongly recommended you. Hope you will be willing to do this for fifteen dollars—the price agreed on with the other company.' " Miss Jaques was their own dramatic arts teacher in Liskeard, and the letter was signed by the head of the Parent-Teacher Association of the Merida Junior High, fifteen miles away.

"Absurd? Well—why absurd?" Sunny's long, gilt-edged lashes were demurely lowered and her fingers busy with the wool tassel on the front of her green

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

jersey, but Kitt wasn't deceived by that soft, pussy-purr voice. Sunny always went purry when she was hatching some scandalous scheme.

"Of course it's absurd. We couldn't give a whole performance. All we've done have been little short acts, just to amuse the kids and the family."

"But we've got the marionettes," Sunny pointed out. "And we know how to handle 'em."

"I . . ." Kitt felt a panic rising, in the face of Sunny's mysterious, stubborn determination. "I can't memorize ten lines. And well you know it." And was immediately startled at the mischief, the dancing excitement, in Sunny's blue gaze.

"But *I* can," she interrupted. And of course she could. Sunny had been favorite story-hour lady at the Hospital for Crippled Children every Friday afternoon for nearly two years.

"And we haven't any real acts," Kitt frantically gathered further protests.

"We'll get 'em. Or write 'em."

"And it's . . .," Kitt looked again at the letter, ". . . only three days off. My heavens, Sunny!"

"Oh, be still!" Good naturedly Sunny, with Betsy beneath her arm, stood over Kitt. "Listen to me, Calamity Jane, *I'll* write the show, *I'll* learn the lines. I'll write it around just those marionettes we have on hand. And to-morrow night it'll be ready to rehearse, and again on Friday. And on Saturday morning. By then we'll be ready for the afternoon performance.

THE LETTER

But naturally," she sank down, long legs beneath her, at Kitt's feet and patted the other's knee, "you'll have to do most of the handling and actual show. They're your marionettes. . . . *Please, Kitten!*"

"But—but! Lights—stage—curtains—trunks to pack 'em in!" Breathlessly Kitt summoned further excuses. But Sunny hugged her happily.

"That's a darling. I knew you'd do it!"

Kitt's defenses crumbled. "It's mad, it's perfectly mad!" But the dimple near her mouth had begun to twinkle and Sunny, knowing the sign, took advantage.

"We'll get hold of Bill right away. What's his number?"

That was Kitt's big brother, Bill. He was a very junior partner in a very small electrical shop downtown and he could make light bulbs do everything but grow roots and flowers. If he could help with the stage, too . . .

"And so," continued Sunny ten minutes later as she hung up the 'phone, "that's all arranged. Bill's a dear. Wish he were my indulgent brother." Sunny was the delightfully pampered only child in the Fairweather family, accustomed to getting her way on all occasions. Or so Kitt told her.

"And you've let us in for the most terrific pile of work. I don't know what we'll pull out of this," she said, her brows wrinkling.

"We'll pull ourselves and a grand marionette show

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

out of it, you'll see." Sunny, sparkling, laughing, now that she had won on all points, whirled Kitt about in a fantastic dance from one end of the long room to the other, clapped her hat on her head, draped the raincoat about her shoulders, bundled the sewing bag and marionettes into Kitt's arms. "You're to scoot home at once, get the puppets into perfect order. And whatever you do, don't get kept for after-school study hall to-morrow. And don't worry. We'll need every minute and all your brains for the rehearsals."

Kitt, laughing too, found herself on the doorstep with G. Washington beneath one arm, Betsy Ross and the sewing bag beneath the other. The rain had cleared, the stars, like freshly washed good omens, twinkled against the darkening sky. Her own house, just across the street, was newly thrilling, packed with this coming adventure. In a very dither of excitement, Kitt scuttled toward home.

Chapter Two

REHEARSAL

KITT followed big brother Bill's wide shoulders as he swung the two sample cases through the Fair-weather front door. Every light in the living room was blazing. What if there were company to-night, of all nights!

But there was only Sunny, beaming a welcome, all the little freckles across her nose seeming about to break into a dance.

"Oh, Bill, how nice of you! I got my family to give us the whole floor to-night; Dad and Mother have gone off to a talkie. Kitt, dear, *must* you look so worried? Don't tell me the marionettes are all down with the flu? Sorry I couldn't stop and talk with you in school to-day, my head was simply buzzing with new ideas and I was afraid to upset them with other matters."

So that was why Sunny, an exalted senior, had

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

passed by this noon in the high school corridor with only an airy wave of her hand, leaving Kitt a little hurt. But, of course, Sunny had had to work out her plan alone, even though the puppets were mostly Kitt's. After all—and the idea made her blink a little—perhaps Sunny was only taking this on just for her, that she might get a real business started with her marionettes.

Sunny was already explaining her ideas to Bill. "I thought we could use the double doorway between the living and dining rooms, set up a sort of platform there to act as 'bridge.'"

They would need a low perch on which to stand and walk back and forth behind the raised puppet stage; the "bridge," as it is called, on which the puppeteer can work in comfort. Without it you have to stretch the wooden controls high above your head in order to bring the doll actors on eye level with the audience. And you couldn't do that for an hour or more. Returning from another quick trip across the street with another parcel of puppets and a third sample case, Bill removed his coat, rolled up his sleeves and set to work. Kit had been busy releasing the puppets from their individual cheesecloth bags.

"Come here, Kitt," Bill spoke from behind the drawn curtains of the doorway. "Stand on this case; see if it's strong enough to hold you. I want to use the cases to pack the puppets, and make them do double duty, if I can."

REHEARSAL

Kitt, puzzled, jumped about obediently.

"Now you, Sunny. You're heavier."

Beginning to get the idea, Kitt stood down while Sunny mounted the step. Bill nodded. "Yes, it's good and strong. The cases were some left in the back of the shop, for a bad debt. Now a board across, and another here,"—he placed a third case beside the others—"and we'll have your bridge."

He was referring, with a glance from time to time, to a large, yellow bound book, open on the floor. Kitt bent over it.

"I slipped into the library at noon and got that." Bill was fitting together some mysterious metal rods. "The diagram of the stage is just about what you want. Only I had some ideas of my own to improve it."

"Needn't have gone to the library," murmured Kitt. "We've got that book in the house." For Kitt had a whole long shelf of puppet lore, accumulated since she was twelve, when she made her first clumsy marionette. Her perusal of the diagram was rudely interrupted. Bill's hand was on her shoulder.

"No loitering backstage. Authors and actors out front. Stage carpenters behind the curtain. March!" He shoved her toward the couch and the fireplace. The curtains swirled together before her face.

Sunny, curled on the couch, ran ink stained fingers through wildly ruffled, taffy colored hair. "We'll have to make a sort of vaudeville show; there wasn't time

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

to write a whole new story, nor for you to make fresh characters for it," she began.

"Honestly," Kitt broke into protest, "I think this is the maddest thing! We can't possibly . . ." Sunny was such a terrifying optimist. No one could produce a marionette show in three days, and the more one saw the complexities unfold, the more impossible it seemed.

"Hush, woman!" Sunny was good-natured, but firm. "They're counting on us. I 'phoned Mrs. Cutler of the P-T Association last night; she's the head of it all, and a friend of mother's, and we're to stay over as her guests for the night. Really, Kitt, we've got a grand start for the show, nearly a dozen marionettes, and we know how to work 'em. Or at least you do."

Yes, that was true. Kitt, in building up an interesting, but scarcely paying, job of making marionettes had naturally learned how to handle them in order to get the balance and stringing right. She could put a puppet through its paces with professional flourish. But the rest of this, the stage and the show, were simply appalling to contemplate. Reluctantly, not really convinced, but swept along by Sunny's boundless enthusiasm, Kitt listened.

It was, then, to be a revue, tied together with some central character. First, as Sunny ticked them off on her fingers, there were George and Betsy. She had a story for them all written, she tapped the papers in

REHEARSAL

her lap. She'd lifted it, word for word out of a fourth grade reader, with conversations and all.

"It's about the making of the flag, so all we'll need is a plain white muslin back drop, and some colonial dolls' chairs, which I found in the attic among some old toys. And, of course, a small stars-and-stripes, for props."

"Why, that's absolutely marvelous!" Kitt felt her pessimism beginning to weaken.

A pleased smirk and a comic bow from Miss Fairweather. "And there's your clown, of course, and in vaudeville there's always an act with two characters, who come out and sing songs. I thought we might rake up an old record I know, about Mister Gallagher and Mister Shean, and I'd do some topical jingles to fit the tune."

Kitt nodded. "The portable victrola behind the scenes would be fine for other bits, too."

"Splendid! Then how about . . ." Scattering the papers from her lap, Sunny slumped down before the record cabinet and began to shuffle through a pile of black disks. "For our two sailors." She held it up triumphantly. "A hornpipe. Easy for the marionettes, because we needn't learn much in the way of words. Just make 'em dance. Listen!"

While she put on the record, Kitt unwound the strings from the wooden controls of the two sailors; one a bearded old salt with a wizened, whiskered face, a miniature pipe in his mouth; the other a fresh faced

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

youngster in gob's cap and sailor pants. From the twenty-inch figures led strings of heavy shoemaker's twine, black, so as to be invisible to the audience. Two for the head, two for knees, one at the seat to make the puppet bend, one for each hand; these were attached to a nine-inch strip of wood with triple crossbars, the control. The bar which controlled the knees was removable, and, when the puppet walked, it was held in the puppeteer's right hand. With this simple device which Kitt had been using and improving for some years, ever since she had made her first crude marionette out of an old doll, the small actor could be made to kneel, to dance, to laugh, to hold out arms in expostulation and appeal. Sunny was not so skillful, but she could put the puppets through the more simple routines.

"Teedle-dee, dee-dee-teedle dee dee dee!" began the hornpipe.

Kitt leaped to her feet on the sofa and held the control so that the puppet's small lead-weighted feet just touched the rug. Sunny, up beside her, walked Barnacle Bill across from the end of the hearth, as representing the edge of the stage, to an assumed center stage.

"Gi' us a hornpipe, Sammy," he commanded with a rich Scotch burr, and sat himself down on an imaginary hogshead.

"Now go on with the dance, Kitt," commanded Sunny, coming out of her character.

That was easy. The hornpipe had been practiced

REHEARSAL

many times at home. Kitt put the newly christened Sam through his paces while Sunny leaped down to rewind the machine, then again to shut it off. Breathlessly she returned to the couch.

"Well, that's one act we're sure of. I'll give you the Betsy Ross lines to learn at home. Don't try to say them; I can speak for them both, since presumably the lady and gent of those days wouldn't both be talking at once, but we'll have to work up gestures to fit the words. That's three checked off."

"If you and your producer will come and inspect the stage," invited Bill from the farther room.

Still wondering how Sunny was planning to tie all these acts together into an interesting show, Kitt swept aside the curtains. There, in front of the bridge, in front of the little stage, Bill had set up a small, skeleton proscenium. He had taken light, hollow metal rods, such as are used to house outdoor electric wiring and had connected them with slip-on joints. These being, he explained, easier to set up in a hurry and less liable than screw joints to jam if they got bent.

"The stage can be any size you wish. This is six feet long and about twenty-eight inches high at the proscenium opening, and seems about the right proportion for your dollies."

Kitt made a face at him. Puppeteers like to think of their marionettes as real actors.

"And it's a stage you can set up pretty easily, if you

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

want to give another show, with the aid of almost any strong-armed, intelligent male. . . ."

"Such as yourself," approved Sunny. "Bill, it's marvelous, it's perfect! I bet we could set it up ourselves, even without your strong-armed hero, but we'll need a bit of practice."

"Practice, practice, practice. . . . Seems to me we'll need . . ." This was Kitt, of course.

"The Complete Pessimist, in one exhaustive volume," scoffed Sunny.

Just the same, Kitt considered silently, it was sweet of her to take all this trouble, produce all this enthusiasm. Sunny, with her huge house, her adoring parents, didn't need, as Kitt did, to make the show a paying success. That is if, by some miracle, it did go over. But if Kitt were ever to get to college, she must start saving for it now; so far every penny she had put aside had melted back into puppets and more puppets, into properties and costumes, more silk for their quaint little bodies, more hair for their funny little wooden heads. And they couldn't accept all this stage and things from Bill. They'd have to make him let them pay for the material.

For almost an hour the girls watched, criticized, suggested, while Bill completed the stage. Raised a foot or so off the floor, the marionettes stepped out on a platform of light weight compo-board laid over the pipe rafters. Back of this was the bridge. Across the front of the small stage, Bill planned to run a shal-

REHEARSAL

low trough to conceal the electric footlights, so arranged that they could be plugged in with a single cord to any ordinary light socket.

"Take a few fuses in your purse," suggested Bill, "in case you blow out the lights in the hall. People seldom have spares, and anyway they can't find them in the dark."

Then Sunny insisted that they continue with the rehearsal. "Though, if we can, we'd better practice on Bill's bridge, so as to get used to it."

They were to have Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, characters already among Kitt's marionettes, and again with a story lifted from a book in the school library. But they would need one more act, maybe two.

"You've forgotten our clown," suggested Kitt, who had slumped, weary, but almost hopeful, in one corner of the couch.

"Oh, he's really the center of the show, the announcer, and we're calling him—"

"Joey?" Kitt strangled a yawn.

"Joey?" Sunny cocked her taffy head, testing the name. "Yes, I like that. Suppose we rehearse with him now. I'll read the lines, to get them in my head, and you follow with action which you think'll fit."

For another hour, with occasional applause from Bill, they rehearsed; till even Kitt was convinced that "it might go over"; till even Sunny, the enthusiastic, was white and weary; till even Bill, the energetic,

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

yawned and reminded Kitt that she had school tomorrow, marionette show or no marionette show.

"But we still need one more act," protested Sunny, checking over the ideas on her fingers. "What is it?"

Bill, struggling into his overcoat, remarked, "Looks to me as though you've got everything but the trained seal."

"An animal act! You've hit it! Can it be done, Kitt? All you have to do . . ."

"All we have to do is about half the show, yet." Kitt was too sleepy to be optimistic.

"All you have to do is to go home and go to bed." Sunny shoved her toward the door. "We'll be ready in time. Somehow. You'll see."

Chapter Three

THE STRINGS UNWIND

AND somehow, miraculously, incredibly, they were. It was half past twelve on Saturday when the last case was loaded into the rumble seat, the last odd package crammed into the final spare inch in Sunny's little car. Back of them lay a whirlwind two days of rehearsal, of dress rehearsal, of lights and curtains, of new strings and new props; ahead of them were the fifteen miles to the Merida High School and unknown adventure.

There was a man at the door to help them unpack and set up the stage, and Mrs. Cutler, in pearls and a French hat, hustling head of the P.-T. Association to enthuse. "So fortunate, we feel ourselves, to have procured such excellent entertainers almost at the last minute."

Sunny and Kitt exchanged dismayed glances.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

Heavens, the woman thought this a professional show! Well, they had, somehow, to live up to that.

"Now what do you call your little company?" asked the interested Mrs. Cutler. "We'll want to announce it, of course."

Sunny was stammering "Why-e-e" when Kitt cut in with, "The Kitt-Cat Marionettes." Just like that, in a firm, matter-of-fact voice. Once, back in grammar school, before Kitt had been ill and forced to drop behind a year, the two, Katherine and Catharine, had become known as the Kitt-Cats, and now the name had flashed to her tongue as a veritable inspiration.

In the packed rush of the next two hours, they made a dozen discoveries and suggestions for the future of the show—if any, as Kitt put it. Bill's arrangements had been excellent, but the curtains needed larger, looser rings for a "quick curtain" and some sort of contraption such as small wire hangers at either side of the stage to hold the marionettes, each puppet ready-to-hand at its entrance. They discovered, too, what stage fright meant.

Kitt's knees felt like warm jelly. "And listen to that mob out there! I suppose that's what is known as a good audience!"

Crouched on the sample cases, sipping the hot cocoa which Mrs. Cutler had sent along, they awaited the signal that the audience was ready.

THE STRINGS UNWIND

"I'm not scared." Sunny firmly set down her cup because the cocoa slopped so. "Just," she affirmed, "excited and tingly. But heavens, listen to 'em!"

Small boys catcalling, shouting across the unfilled spaces of the auditorium into which poured rapidly a larger and ever noisier horde.

"How soon?" Mrs. Cutler's French hat appeared round the edge of the large curtain. "Right away? The children get so restless if they have to wait."

"Restless!" muttered Kitt sceptically as she tried to steady her quivering knees. On the bridge, Joey's control in hand, she waited for Sunny to snatch open the curtains of the little stage. Fortunately, from here one wouldn't be able to see the audience, only the back of the masking curtain, but, to judge by the slight attention accorded Mrs. Cutler's speech of introduction, the boys were more interested in their own loud chatter than in the forthcoming performance.

Mrs. Cutler's voice died, or was drowned. Amid an increasing hubbub, the curtain swung back and the first performance of the Kitt-Cat Marionettes had begun—begun like a waking nightmare. From Kitt's trembling fingers, the strings tangled, became utterly unmanageable, Joey's head dropped back absurdly, loose on its tape, his knees writhed meaninglessly between his arms as he wobbled an inch or two above the stage. Sunny's quavering voice could not have been heard beyond the fifth row of the audience. But no

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

one seemed to be listening, and second by second the disturbance in the back of the hall grew louder, more overwhelming.

Finally the voice of Mrs. Cutler came piercing through the uproar beyond the footlights. "Could you possibly close the show for a few minutes? I want . . ."

Could they? Could they do otherwise! With one sweep of her hand Sunny, white-faced, every freckle blazing with indignation, clashed the rings along the rod. But Kitt? Sunny's round eyes followed her as she blew back the curl over her eyes, stepped down from the bridge, swept through the outside curtains, out beside the apologetic Mrs. Cutler.

With a glance that asked permission, Kitt, very slim and straight in her little blue, starched smock, raised cupped hands to her mouth, summoned her one vocal accomplishment and pierced the uttermost corners of the hall with an astounding cry.

"Cuck . . . cool! Cuckcool! Cuck . . . cool!"

What? A bird in the hall? A cuckoo? Heads tipped back, round O's of astonished mouths gaped at the girl in blue. A silence of admiration, even of envy, that such small-boy talent should be wasted on a grown-up, and a mere girl at that, seemed to seep swiftly through the masculine audience. You could have heard a puppet sigh. Every eye was on Kitt, every ear full-cocked.

"What's the matter back there?" Kitt could hear her

THE STRINGS UNWIND

voice grow steady as she spoke. "Don't you want to hear our show?"

"Sure!" "Sure do!" "But Missis . . . but wait, M'am . . . we can't *see* back here!" came in shrill tones from the farthest seats where two frantic teachers were trying to restore order. Kitt had discovered the trouble: that the shorter children in the back sat too low, in their untiered seats, to see the puppet stage.

"How long," she turned to Mrs. Cutler, "would it take to remove all the chairs?"

"About ten minutes. . . ."

"And let all the children sit on the floor?"

As one executive to another, Mrs. Cutler nodded brisk agreement and the order was given. Kitt, shining-eyed with this new and surprising confidence, returned in ten minutes to the front of the big stage and received again that flattering attention. Now even those 'way at the back had a clear view.

"You can all see, but can you listen?" she demanded with a grin. "We hope you can—and that you'll like our show. That's all." She puffed back that refractory lock again, twinkled at the audience and popped out of sight. The ensuing shout of approval almost bulged out the windows, but was followed by an attention so profound and flattering that even the marionettes must have felt that their best performance was required.

Sunny, on the bridge, her eyes still large with astonishment, had whispered, "Ready?"

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

Kitt had nodded briskly. Of course she was ready! And the play was on.

Joey, the clown, held center stage. With three other marionettes, he discussed the Puppet Maker, Papa John, who had created them and who held their controls. But the puppets, made for sale, didn't wish to leave Papa John. Joey had a solution to offer. Once they were out in the world they were to behave their very worst: tangle their strings, disobey their controls. "Just," interpolated Joey, "as I did a moment ago. You see?" And then no one would want to keep them and they would be returned to the Puppet Maker to stay.

The curtains closed, were opened again. The scheme had been a success. All had been sold but had behaved so badly that they had been returned to the Puppet Maker. With tipped-back head Joey addressed the Puppeteer.

"Papa John! Papa John! We'll never have to leave you now. Aren't you glad?"

"No, no. You've ruined me!" came Papa John's deep, despairing voice from above. "I can never sell another puppet. What shall I do?"

Joey hung his head. He hadn't, he said, thought of that. The other marionettes looked very chagrined.

Then said the little brown bear with the bright red collar, "Why, but Papa John, we'll play for you. We'll put on such a lov-uvely show that people will *pay* to

THE STRINGS UNWIND

come see it, and if you keep us always we'll make more for you than if you'd sold us!"

Applause from the other puppets; from the audience. Joey cleared the stage and the revue began. There was Red Riding Hood and the Wolf. Then followed the sailors with their hornpipe, and after that a song, with lilting little topical verses written by Sunny, into which she had introduced names of various small boys from the Merida School. A huge success this, almost literally a howling success. When the hall was quiet again, there was the animal act, a very soft, woolly Teddy Bear who juggled balls and a rod. There was Zelig, the beautiful Persian dancer, and finally the General, Betsy and the story of the flag. By a coincidence, some of the younger pupils had been studying the history of the flag, so this act also met with particular applause. Finally there were Joey and all the others on the stage again. Tipping his head back, to look upwards, the little clown asked, "Wasn't that a lovely show, Papa John?"

"I never thought you had it in you," came the voice of the Puppet Maker above. "But see what the audience thinks."

Thus appealed to, the audience expressed itself freely and without embarrassment. Wild clapping, whistles, foot stamping, even a cheer or two; such applause, as seemed to Kitt and Sunny, gross overpayment for what they had done. One felt almost compelled to repay it in some way; perhaps a repetition of the entire per-

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

formance. But white faced, and more weary than they had realized, they could only stand before the curtain, wavering, smiling uncertainly.

The applause died down, the crowd began to move. Almost immediately the girls were ringed about by a sea of youngsters wanting to be shown by what magic the marionettes had come alive.

Kitt felt completely unable to cope with this situation. What did one do now? Then Sunny's hand on her arm gave her a little shove.

"Go and sit down. I can handle these."

It didn't seem quite fair to leave this enthusiastic mob to Sunny. But perhaps one could manage such adults as hovered respectfully admiring about the fringes. There was a group of teachers, there was Mrs. Cutler—and Miss Jaques who had started all this. Kitt's carefully planned speech of reproach for her former teacher melted before their congratulations. Most surprising of all was a woman from a summer camp, a school camp in the Adirondack mountains. Could the Kitt-Cat Marionettes possibly spare her a date, early next summer, for the camp? Almost with the eagerness of a bargain hunter she made her request.

"Why . . . I'll ask my partner," Kitt stammered. Better leave it to Sunny to explain that, after all, theirs was not a professional company, and gracefully refuse.

But in astonishment, Kitt saw Sunny nonchalantly draw from the pocket of her working smock a little

THE STRINGS UNWIND

notebook, a small book in which she had jotted down the marionette characters and their order of appearance on the stage. Sunny thumbed it over rapidly.

Glancing up she asked, "Would July fourteenth be all right? We seem to have . . ." Her voice trailed off. One gathered that July fourteenth was free. "A little later? All right, August seventh?" And with a brisk businesslike nod she set down the date with a stub of a pencil.

A moment later, alone with her partner, Kitt protested, "But why did you take it down, Sunny? Why not refuse outright? But, of course, we can't keep such a date. . . ." And at Sunny's continued silence reiterated, "We *couldn't*, of course. . . . Could we?"

Sunny's eyes were crinkled, half-moons of amusement. "Oh—I should think we might," said that relentless optimist, Miss Fairweather.

Chapter Four

MYSTERY

Two weeks slipped by. Three, and four. Sunny hadn't again mentioned that date for August seventh and Kitt was beginning to breathe freely once more, even though she felt a little disappointed. Well, she knew when she was safe and she certainly wasn't going to be the first to speak of anything so completely mad.

But there was a mystery about somewhere, something, she was sure, quite apart from anything so far off as August, something about which Sunny had been talking to Kitt's mother. But why Kitt's mother before Kitt herself?

Moms, embroidering by the fire after dinner, had said, "I think Sunny's plan a splendid one, my dear. Only you must take enough warm things. The country will be awfully cold in April."

"What plan is that, Moms?" Kit had half a mar-

MYSTERY

ionette on her lap and, with strong, skillful fingers, rammed down the hospital cotton into the long cylinders of pale yellow, Japanese cotton *crêpe* that would soon be puppet arms and legs. The cylinders filled, she stitched them across the top with strong double thread, next to the feet. These were already cut and machine stitched, but must be weighted with solder, a cut-off piece of flat wire well wrapped in cotton before it went into the foot, cotton stuffed around it and rammed in with a pencil, and the foot attached to the leg. With the check from their Merida performance, they had insisted on paying Bill, at least for his materials. But that still left eleven dollars and sixty cents to be divided between the two partners. There had been some argument over that, Sunny insisting that all the original material had been of Kitt's purchasing, Kitt insisting that Sunny should have some payment as the author of the revue. A compromise was reached by voting it a common fund, to be turned back into more marionettes for the Kitt-Cat Company.

Moms had said something. . . . Oh, yes. Kitt glanced up with a mouthful of pins and an absent frown. "What plan?"

Mums repeated, "Why, that you should go up to the Fairweather cabin together for the spring vacation." She sounded puzzled; just as though she thought Kitt must have already planned it with Sunny.

"Oh," commented Kitt. "Oh, yes. It does sound great fun." And she wondered. Well, of course it

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

was just a coincidence—until Dad spoke of it as though he, too, thought it had been prearranged between the two girls. Mysteriouser and mysteriouser.

“Sunny’s a practical person,” said Dad. “And she tells me they have a man who lives near the cabin to cut wood, tend fires and bring up water.”

Of course it would be exciting. The Fairweathers had had the place for two summers, but Kitt had never been there. Spring vacation was only a week off, with budding trees and the smell of green things growing in mountain woods. Yes, it was a good plan. But whose plan was it? Certainly not hers. Inwardly amused, she kept quiet and waited.

Sunny introduced the subject as though it were new. Casually she began, “It’d be sort of fun if you and I could run up to the cabin for over the holidays.”

Kitt suppressed a spasm of mirth and, almost, controlled her treacherous dimple. Sunny glanced up.

“Kitt! You young devil! You’ve heard about it already!” she accused.

Kitt giggled. “Seems like as if . . .” she drawled, in Adirondack patois.

On the first morning of vacation, all blue and gold and springy, with a nipping little wind, the girls swung their suitcases off the miniature local train at Fort William station. Sunny had promised that Wallace, their camp handy man, would be there to pick them up. But no Wallace appeared.

MYSTERY

"Oh, bother!" Sunny stood on the track behind the disappearing train and gazed about blankly. "Now, what do we do?"

Kitt suggested that they might lug their bags to the top of the short hill where, one could see, the main street began. But here also was disclosed no handy man. And the camp was eleven miles out along a rough country road. Laden with a suitcase apiece they couldn't hope to walk there.

However, there were groceries to purchase. "There's only one store. If he's been held up by anything, he'll expect to meet us there," thought Sunny aloud. "Let's get that job cleared up."

The general store, small and crowded, was hot with the fire from a huge, pot-bellied stove. Kitt had voted to be chief cook of the expedition and had her list ready; Sunny was sure there were plenty of staples, salt, sugar, cocoa, already at the log cabin.

"So we'll just get meat and vegetables, bread and cake," said Kitt, ordering sufficient for their five or six days in camp while Sunny went off to explore the two blocks of Main Street for news of the missing Wallace. She returned as Kitt was superintending the packing of bread and eggs into a huge paper bag, so that they wouldn't be crushed beneath cans of salmon and corned beef.

Sunny leaned against the counter. "Wallace hasn't been seen for a week or more.—Kitt, won't the cash box run to chocolates of some kind? I get so hungry for

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

candy at the camp. Chocolate bars'll do.—Why, they say he hasn't been running his car all winter. I asked at the post office and the drug store."

The clerk behind the counter confirmed this troubling news.

"Oh, but that's bad, isn't it?" worried Kitt. "Will we have to walk all the way?"

Sunny laughed. "Goodness, no. Is anybody down from Cutter Hill?" she asked the clerk.

"Hiley Steves might be, Mis' Fairweather. He was in earlier this mornin'. Said as how he was comin' back. That'll be his car there now, that old Ford."

Sunny dashed from the store again. Kitt, weighing a can of sardines in her hand and considering a lemon to help the flavor, saw her stop a rattletrap old car which drew up at the curb. A bearded man leaned out to speak to Sunny, nodded, spat, and glanced toward the store.

The door flew open again. "It's all right. Come on, Kitt," she called breathlessly. "Hiley says he's got an errand on the way and he'll take us the rest of the distance to the cabin. But he's got to be back here later to pick up some freight at the station. We'll have to hurry. Leave those bags. Hiley'll put them in the car."

Hiley said he had his own groceries to pick up, and Kitt, leaning out over the car door, saw him pack two large bags of provisions into the back seat on top of other boxes and bundles.

MYSTERY

"Got to stop at White's Farm," he said, squeezing in beside them where, even before, there had scarcely seemed room for a slim mouse. Kitt held her suitcase on her lap; Sunny's bag was beneath their knees.

Almost immediately they rattled off the smooth Montreal Highway and jolted down a pockmarked road, across the bridge, roared in second gear up a short hill and, swooping into high, zoomed between meadows already powdering into green, orchards faintly budding in the warm sunlight. Kitt temporarily forgot that this trip held a mystery, and sniffed the air with complete ecstasy. What fun this was going to be! How sweet of Sunny to have thought of it! And uttering little squeals of joy over the tall blue mountains rapidly looming ahead, she was told that this one was "Sleeping Beauty," that "Furnace" shoved its dark, pine-clad head just beyond, that their road led through that opening gap. Four miles and they jolted to a stop.

"Hev to climb out here a minute and leave some feed," explained their chauffeur and lumbered through a white picket gate into the farmyard. Beyond them came squeals and yapping as of many dogs.

Sunny explained that this was the White Farm. "They take dogs to board, too. See there, behind the chicken wire fence? They have runs and things. . . ."

But Kitt, unhearing, had scrambled down and was standing in the road. Dark head uncovered to the breeze, she stretched wide arms of rapture, wriggled

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

gloved fingers. "Oh . . . oh, I love it, I love it!" she crooned happily.

Sunny grinned down at her from the car. "Hop in again, Kitt. Don't be a goopy; it's just spring and the mountain air that's gone to your silly head!" But her audience had vanished.

Kitt was leaping across the road, was tapping fingers of invitation on the wire of the dogs' fence, bending close to peer within. The chorus of barks and yaps increased to a deafening volume, and behind the screen were blurred wild leapings of furry forms.

Over her shoulder Kitt called, "Oh, do come here, Sunny. Isn't this the darlingest . . ."

"Don't go giving your heart away. They all have owners, you know."

But Kitt's affection had been instantly claimed by the odd one of the lot. Most of the dogs were collies or wire-haired terriers. This one was different, oh, so different! A small pointed nose, coal-black and shiny, a seal-black head, sleek as though wet, melting dark eyes, long floppy ears and a ratty, wagging tail. Between these a slim arched body, wide-chested, amusingly long, upheld by short black bow legs and flat black paws; a dachshund, shiny black, almost fully grown, absurdly lovable.

Mr. White and Hiley came down the steps. "Afternoon, Mis' Fairweather. Good to see ye. Bit early here for ye, ain't it?"

Sunny explained their brief visit and bobbed her

MYSTERY

head toward Kitt. "She's got a crush on one of your dogs, Mr. White."

"What? That ther sausage dog?" Mr. White's gesture was apologetic. "He ain't no good. Can't ever hunt, can't ever herd sheep, ain't no watch dog."

"Oh, but he's such a darling." Kitt's fingers were being lavishly saluted through the wire. "Is he yours?"

"Yep. Mine. Folks that brought him here never paid no board and that was three months ago. Never heard from 'em since."

"Oh, but then will you let me have him? . . . Sell him to me?" Kitt was too eager to own the dog to be her usual cautious self, though almost before the words, "Sell him," were out, she realized that Mr. White had been about to make her a present of the dachshund.

But her enthusiasm had caused his Yankeeism to blossom. Cautiously he eyed her, contemplatively he spat in the road. He jerked a thumb toward the dog pen. "Give me a dollar for him?"

Kitt went suddenly all stubborn, answering Yankeeism with its kind. "Nope. Fifty cents."

And was startled almost out of her neat little laced boots to hear him reply, "Dog's you'n, Miss."

Which was all right, if she had that much. From her purse she began to count out the coins. "Thirty-five, thirty-six. Sunny, will you lend me thirteen cents?"

"I'll give it to you," said Sunny. "Then almost a

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

third of him will be mine. We'll take him right along, Mr. White."

With the feed bag gone there was room in the back for Kitt's bag, and the dachshund snuggled on her lap. The car clattered its way toward that gap in the hills.

"What'll we call him, Sunny? Low. . . . Low Something? Lie down, Low Something. Oh, you'll have to have a name right away if you're to learn to obey."

"Lowengrin?" suggested Sunny sedately.

"Idiot! No. Low Boy? . . . Don't quite like that either. How about . . . Low Jinks?"

Hiley chuckled and Sunny nodded approval. Thus did Low Jinks become the third member of the Kitt-Cat troupe.

Chapter Five

MYSTERY SOLVED

IT was darkening with the rapidity of early April when Sunny fitted her key into the lock. "Thanks so much, Hiley," she called over her shoulder. "Yes, the stuff'll be all right, there on the veranda. Don't wait."

With Low Jinks under her arm Kitt picked up her suitcase and followed into the big living room. Vaguely she had been aware of a gorgeous grove of silver birch, ghostlike in the dying daylight, of a purple mountain top looming immensely above them, of the scent of pines and chill freshness and a so-called road, a one-time logging trail. Dropping the case she rubbed her elbow and wondered if bruises could be mortal. The distant clash of springs and gears proclaimed that Hiley had got as far as that jagged outcrop of rock beyond the open meadow. Marooned like Crusoe,

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

but, thank heaven, they didn't have to rescue their next five days' meals from a stormy sea!

The scratch of a match, the sound of groping feet, the clink of a lamp chimney, and the room sprang into view. This was going to be fun! A huge, barnlike room, the walls of whitewashed logs, the floor of blue painted planking, a big table in the middle, bunks in one corner, a stone fireplace at the end and doors leading off in two directions.

"Better shut the door," was Sunny's suggestion. "Then you can put the dog down. Once he's fed, he won't be so likely to go off hunting rabbits and lose himself in the woods."

The shaded lamp gave little detail, but Kitt noted comfortable modern fittings, shelves of pleasant books, warm Indian rugs, antlers over the fireplace, bright cushions and deep chairs.

"And the first thing, my child," said Sunny, the Sybarite, "is a fire and food."

Pine needles and a match started the ready-laid fire on the big hearth. Jinks's inquisitive nose examined his new domain while the girls shed hats and heavy coats, rubbed hands before the quickening blaze. Sunny was laying heavier wood on the flames as Kitt made a dash out into the cold for Sunny's bag and the provisions. There was the small suitcase, on the edge of the veranda. She sought hastily for the big paper bags, caught up the case and hurried back to warmth and brightness.

MYSTERY SOLVED

"Where did you tell Hiley to put the things?"

"Can't you find 'em? Wait a jiff, I'll get a flashlight and help. They can't be far."

Fifty yards, a hundred yards back along the trail, but still they found nothing. The bags just weren't. All those groceries, all the meat and vegetables, the fruit and chocolate . . . and eleven miles to the village. Now what would old R. Crusoe have done? They slammed the door to shut out the cold, and dived back to the comforting blaze.

"There'll be stuff in the storeroom of course," consoled Sunny. "And to-morrow . . ."

Kitt's present hunger rejected plans for the future in favor of a little something on account.

"If you'll take the lamp, and forage," continued Sunny, "I'll tend to these blankets. Mother made me promise to air them as soon as I got in." She turned toward the bunks. "Upper or lower? Uppers are more fun, aren't they?"

"Lots," said Kitt, and flashlamp in hand stepped through the farther of the two other doors, but was immediately stopped by a barrier against her ankles. Low Jinks, just behind, sniffed expectantly. This, said his nose, is not the room for food.

No food, but—Kitt set the flash abruptly on the washstand of the small bedroom and bent to examine the cases, four of them, at her feet. Whistling silently to herself she unbuckled a strap. Marionettes in one case, in another, Bill's pipe proscenium. No

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

need to examine the others. Here was the equipment of the Kitt-Cat Marionette Company; even to two extra packages, one large and flat, the other small and chunky. So now, Sunny, my dear, the mystery is solved! She fumbled in a case.

Still grinning Kitt returned to the living room. "I don't suppose you'd care for a purely cannibal meal, would you?" She held out Joey the clown. "If not, you'd better give me better directions as to how to find the pantry."

Sunny, the brazen, didn't even flinch. "S'pose I might as well confess." It had really been very simple. She had been so anxious for the Kitt-Cats to keep that August engagement that she had finally confided her plan to Bill, who had said that he had a shop delivery to make up in this part of the mountains. Together they had arranged to kidnap the puppets, load the lot on the truck and dump them here. "But before I could do that I had to find out if your father or mother minded your coming up with me. . . ."

"Oh, so that was it?" Well, Sunny was right, of course. At home there wasn't space to set up the complete stage and to leave it, day after day, in that state of constructive disorder so necessary to creative work. Here, indeed, was the ideal workshop. And Sunny had even remembered to purchase unbleached muslin and wax crayons for the new back drops.

"Forgiven, Kitt?" she asked a little anxiously.

Kitt snorted. "Don't be a silly. It's a swell plan;

MYSTERY SOLVED

wish I'd thought of it first. But lordy, I'm ravenous. Where is this store of food of which you prate?"

They raided the pantry. It was adventurous, pioneering with civilized improvements: dishes, can opener, knives and forks. The only cans seemed to contain salmon, out of which Jinks was also fed. Crackers from an unopened box, a jar of strawberry jam, patent cocoa needing only the addition of hot water from the kettle on the crane. Munched close to the hearth, this made a delightful impromptu meal and every crumb was cleared before they piled the dishes into the kitchen and voted to wash up in the morning.

Kitt glanced at Sunny, Sunny at Kitt. They both grinned and started for the room where the marionettes were packed. It was days now, since they'd last handled them, and more than thrilling to have the show up here, all on their own with no interruptions, nothing else to think about. Also when the forest outside rustled with strange sounds, and they realized they were a long way from home, the familiar snub nose of Joey the Clown, the funny jointed yo-heave-ho roll of Barnacle Bill, would be reassuring company.

Sunny had propped Barnacle Bill on a chair in front of her and was considering lines for a possible sea song, Kitt was trying to make Betsy Ross imitate Low Jinks's floppy waddle when a heavy tread crossed the veranda and there was a rap at the door.

"Gosh, I wonder—"

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

"Hurray, that'll be Hiley with the groceries he forgot to leave!"

But the morose, unshaven face of the tall man in the stained mackinaw, blue jeans and gum boots was a stranger to Kitt.

"Evenin', Miss Catharine," he nodded to Sunny. "Bin on the lake a-fishin'. Calculated I'd jist drop in and see what them lights was doin' here. So ye got up all right, did ye?"

Sunny nodded introductions. This was Wallace, the man who was to have met them at the station. Maybe . . . But Sunny voiced the idea first.

"Hiley Steves brought us up. But he forgot our groceries, so they must be in his car, or at Swan's in the village. Could you drive in for them in the morning?"

Wallace removed his cap, unbuttoned his mackinaw, shifted a quid contemplatively from cheek to cheek before replying. That, it appeared, was just what he couldn't do, and for the same reason he hadn't been able to meet 'em at the depot. His car had been laid up all winter, couldn't run without no license and he wouldn't have no money for no license this summer, times bein' what they was. Of course he'd pass word down to Hiley, if anybody was goin' that way in the next few days, and he himself could spare them a little coffee and sugar.

Hurriedly Sunny declined. They'd have things like that, she was pretty sure, in the storeroom. Dad always

MYSTERY SOLVED

saw to that before they closed up the cabin in the fall.

Wallace re-shifted his quid. If they'd only come up, he indicated, later in the season when folks generally came, some one could have met them.

Sunny explained the unusual visit: spring vacation, the desire to get to work on the marionettes. "Show him one, Kitt."

Kitt walked Betsy Ross back and forth across the floor, holding the control high in both hands. Wallace's dour gaze regarded the marionette thoughtfully. Betsy received a puzzled prod from a large gnarled finger.

"Seems like a long ways for two big gals like you to come to play with their dolls." And his tone conveyed a distressing doubt of their sanity.

Chapter Six

BARNACLE BILL

BOTH Kitt and Sunny had clambered into their bunks when they remembered the light on the table. Kitt, being last in, voted to get down again while Sunny, who had taken the flash to her bed, directed it downward for the climb back in the darkness.

Kitt paused, one foot on the lower bunk, Low Jinks beneath her arm. "Is it safe to leave the door open, Sunny, if I take the pup to bed with me? I think he'll stay all right. And I would like to be able to see the stars over the mountain, through the open door."

"Sure," assured Sunny. Then in Wallace's tones, "Thar hain't no b'ars in them thar hills."

As Kitt scrambled upward again, she nearly dislodged a row of fishing poles arranged on nails in the side of the cabin above her bunk. "If I get hungry in the night I can fish for a tin of salmon," she murmured sleepily and was conscious for a moment of Low Jinks

BARNACLE BILL

sniffing round and round, scrabbling for a place for his small black body among the blankets at her feet, and of nothing else at all for some hours.

Slowly through her dreams rumbled and ground what seemed to be a railroad train, grinding its way up a steep grade. "*Gr . . . r . . . r . . . r, Gr . . . r . . . r, Gr . . . r . . . r.*" Louder and louder every minute. With eyes tightly shut, too warmly comfortable to let sleep escape her entirely, she clung to the dream. "*Gr . . . r . . . r, Gr . . . r . . . ,*" the grinding continued. Then a whisper, sharp and clear,—Sunny's voice, piercing through to her consciousness.

"Kitt, Kitt! What's that noise, Kitt?"

Kitt sat up in bed. Darkness, except for the starlight outside. Jinks was down at her feet, near Sunny's head; she could hear him whimpering and whining; a sharp yap from him swept away the last of her dream. The grinding stopped, began again. It seemed to be right in the room with them. Then a rustle and a rattle, and the *pad, scrape, pad*, of heavy, clawed feet on the wooden floor of the cabin.

Sunny had *said* there weren't any bears!

"For Pete's sake, turn on your flash, Sunny. If I've got to be eaten, I'd like a little light on it."

Sunny could be heard fumbling beneath her pillow, and immediately the room was illuminated by a long beam from the flash. "There it is, that's it! See! By the table leg!"

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

The first feeling, as Kitt leaned over her bunk, was one of disappointment. What, that small thing? Small, at least for a bear or a railroad train, or even a mountain lion. Something dark and hunched up and bristly waddled round the end of the table and faced the light with small blinking eyes. Jinks whimpered and barked again.

"Don't let him down, Sunny. Better hold him."

"It's a porcupine," explained the more experienced Sunny. "Probably came in through the open door and was gnawing the bark on those table legs. Now, what do we do next?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Kitt. "They throw their quills, don't they? Can they shoot as high as this?"

"Goofy!" said Sunny. Just the same, one couldn't exactly go back to sleep with a porcupine so intimately in the household. Nor could one, with bare ankles and those menacing quills, face the task of driving it out into the night. No telling about those quills. Sunny had been sure about the bears, too!

While they went into conference, Sunny switched off the light to save the battery. Kitt had the best idea. "If I could just get hold of my shoes!" High laced boots which she had left on the floor near the bunk. But she didn't feel equal to climbing down and getting them.

Then a flung-up arm encountered something overhead that clattered.

"I've got it!" she cried. "Fishing poles!"



What price shoes, with a brave seaman for protector!

BARNACLE BILL

"So what?" said Sunny.

"Put on the light and I'll fish for my shoes. But do hang on to Jinks."

By sheer good luck there was a hook and line on the first pole they got down. But the pole itself was too long and too awkward to allow the hook to swing directly beneath the bunk. Sunny held a steady flash as they cast and cast again, but without result. Her own shoes had been left somewhere across the room, there by the chair where sat Barnacle Bill. Maybe they could get those. Kitt cast farther a-stream.

There was a scrabbling rush from the porcupine as the hook caught tight in the scruff of Barnacle Bill's neck and swung him clear of his chair. Sunny collapsed in laughter into her bunk and the light went out. Barnacle Bill's leaded feet clattered a tattoo on the boards of the floor.

"Now how'm I going to get clear of him?" said Kitt.

"Pull him aboard," wheezed Sunny through gasps of mirth. "Unhook him and try again." And she flashed on the torch. Jinks's barking almost drowned her voice, but her arm held his frantic wriggling little body close and tight.

The porcupine made a rush for Barnacle Bill, swung savagely round, bristling tail foremost, to let this strange apparition impale itself on his quills. But the gallant sailor, unlike a dog, refused to be tempted. Another rush and yet another, each courageously with-

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

stood by the able old salt, and each rush bringing the porcupine nearer the door. What price shoes, with a brave seaman for protector!

With Sunny's torch spot-lighting the strange engagement, Kitt had discarded the shoe idea, Bill's tactics being more effective.

"Go it, Bill!" Sunny cheered him on. Jinks's excited yapping added further encouragement.

Now only a yard to the door. Suddenly the porcupine abandoned his rear-guard action and made a bolt for safety. They could hear the rattle and drag of its quills across the porch, hear it lumber down the steps. Then, silence.

Dropping the fishpole anyhow, across the table, Kitt scrambled down from her bunk, slammed the door and unhitched the brave Barnacle Bill. Back to safety. The light went out.

Kitt subsided with a giggle of relief. "Now, Sunny, unless any more of your little wild friends are due to call, suppose we get in a bit of sleep!"

Chapter Seven

PLANS PROGRESS

BREAKFAST was of salmon, more cocoa, more crackers. But it wasn't just a breakfast; it was an adventure. An adventure with the smoke of pine needle kindling driving them, coughing and weeping, from the kitchen until they discovered the right dampers; with water drawn by bucket from the spring below the cabin, clumsily spilled, anyway a good bit of it, inside Kitt's shoes as she swung the heavy pail up the steep path; everything you did seemed to call for some knack that made everything seem of special importance.

Kitt chose all the outdoor chores so that she could feast her eyes on distant lines of mountain tops or, hurrying from woodshed to kitchen, sniff up great lungfuls of the pine scented air *en route*.

"You know, Sunny," she burst out, after one of these excursions, "people are goops."

Sunny, scraping mixed soot and mouse nest out of

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

the back of the oven, paused politely to ask how, and shoved in a loose hairpin with a blackened forefinger.

"Treading on each other's toes, in towns and cities, when they might be out here." Though, as Sunny pointed out, if they all came out here, this would be the city and the other places would go back to pine woods and beech forest!

And there was salmon again, for lunch.

"Your family seems fond of salmon," remarked Kitt.

Sunny groaned. "We loathe it. It's almost a family complex. Some client of Dad's sent him a whole case from British Columbia, and in two years we haven't opened one can. Till yesterday."

Dishes were Sunny's job. With those finished, they returned to the big living room to spread out the marionettes and the theatre. Kitt measured out long yards of unbleached muslin and sprawled on the floor, roughing in with ordinary ten-cent wax crayons the outline of the various back drops. For Barnacle Bill, the bow of an old square-rigger and a bit of wharf copied from a book on the shelf; for the Gallagher and Shean act, a miniature edition of an old-fashioned vaudeville curtain with its old-fashioned local advertising. For Red Riding Hood, of course a forest scene and a thatched cottage. Then the sketches were filled in with solid color, the wax set with a warm iron on the wrong side of the material, and you had stage

PLANS PROGRESS

scenery that would neither crack nor peel and, when folded, took up almost no room at all.

On the second day, a gorgeous day if it hadn't been for a salmon breakfast, salmon lunch and the prospect of salmon for dinner, Wallace slouched up the trail.

"Seemed like I'd better see't you wasn't runnin' out o' kindlin' or somethin'."

But he couldn't do the one thing they really wanted, bring up their provisions from the village. "That old car now, I reckon I wouldn't get her license fees out er her this year. Thar ain't the summer folks thar used ter be and mostly they brings their own cars."

It was then, Sunny said afterwards, that her brain sparked. If Wallace would let them have his big five-passenger car, large enough with its back seat removed to hold the marionettes, cases, props and all, for this summer, they could turn it back to him in the fall fully licensed and in good state of repair and at a time when he most needed it to bring up hunting parties. The idea, she protested modestly, didn't come all at once. Nor were they ever quite clear at just what point Wallace accepted it. Kitt's cautious objection was that it was silly to take on a big car like that, even as a loan, for a single solitary engagement. Sunny airily waved that aside. If one summer camp wanted the Kitt-Cat Marionettes badly enough to pay for them, others might, too. If they had the car . . . Sunny had a license and Kitt could get one soon . . . well, anyway there was a big school camp, Camp Ce-

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

darbrook, quite near Fort William, right on their way home. For experience they might stop off there and see about the chance of an engagement.

"*Other* camps! *More* engagements!" Kitt's reaction to this astounding idea was characteristic. Her own idea being, as she outlined it somewhat uneasily to Sunny, that they'd gone just about as far as they dared with this professionalism. It was all right to give one show, the show they'd been rushed into at the high school. And perhaps even this summer camp date, since they had now a repertoire of one revue, and all the puppets and back drops that were necessary.

"Hardly worth while making all those back drops just for one more date," declared Sunny, seated on the table, swinging one foot lazily. "We could have gotten along with what we had, and we can't keep a date without a car. And if we get enough more dates, we can afford to get Wallace's car."

There was something wrong in that reasoning, but Kitt couldn't put her fingers on it. Dropping her crayons she sat back on her heels to survey Sunny. Just what was Miss Fairweather's scheme, after all?

Miss Fairweather's mouth curled in a knowing grin. "To build up a good marionette company," she explained blandly. "A professional company, if you like. And professional means 'undertaken as a means of subsistence.' I know because I looked it up. We got fifteen dollars for that show at Merida. If we could get half a dozen more this summer . . ."

PLANS PROGRESS

"But, Sunny, you don't need a 'means of subsistence.'" Kitt blew the lock back out of her eyes. "You get a fat allowance."

"S'never big enough. And anyway I want to be able to do something for a living, not just the usual *début* and dances and things."

That was funny about her, Kitt thought. Sunny, even if she finished college, wouldn't need to earn her own living. But Kitt, if she wanted to go to college, must do it herself. Once, two years ago, she had hoped that making marionettes might pay well enough to start that college fund, but that idea had gone up in smoke. All her small profits had gone back into more and better puppets. Perhaps Sunny was on the right line. There weren't many people who wanted to buy puppets, but people would always pay to be entertained. So Sunny's point was won, temporarily, though Kitt's heart gave a sickening drop, like an elevator out of control, whenever she thought of appearing before an audience again.

In the cabin just the ordinary process of living took so much longer than they had expected: lighting fires, trimming lamps, keeping yourself, the cabin, Jinks, clothes and dishes in order without any special facilities. Yet they enjoyed it, and, hurrying frantically from task to task, actually accomplished a great part of what they had planned to do. They had had four full rehearsals of the entire performance; most of the new back drops were finished; Sunny had written a

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

song for Barnacle Bill and taught it to him, with gestures; Kitt was talking about a character in *Alice in Wonderland* which could be built into an act, perhaps Humpty Dumpty.

Sunny, hurling the latest empty salmon can out into the ash pit, had still further grounds for jubilation.

"To-morrow, my child, we shake the pine needles out of our hair and start for home and Liskeard. Sundaes will greet us along the road, roast beef sandwiches, and apple pies, large and fat, will rise up to call us famished, and plump green asparagus tips laid neatly in a salad will wave little welcoming hands as we pass by. Pass, but not disregard 'em." She spun round on her heels. "For heaven's sake, see if you can't do something to disguise the salmon for supper, even if you have to flavor it with kerosene! Jinks looks more like a seal every hour and I'm sure I'm growing flippers."

Yet when they lugged their fourth and final load of things down the trail to the car, whose ancient springs Sunny was afraid to risk on the rough trail, Kitt lingered a pace or two behind and waved an affectionate farewell to the friendly little cabin, the silver birches, and the pines. Not until the last of their belongings were packed inside the car, not until Sunny had driven away with Wallace's anxious advice rumbling behind them, not till the jagged mountain had faded into a soft blue blur beyond the wakening apple

PLANS PROGRESS

orchards, did Kitt gulp over the lump in her throat and try to speak:

"Been a grand five days, Sunny."

"And what we need most now . . ." Sunny broke off to change gears as she swung into the main road and Fort William, "is a telephone and a square meal."

The proprietor of the Good Eat Shop seemed surprised as they clambered out of Wallace's ancient car. Yes, sure he had a 'phone. Yes, there'd be plenty to eat.

"You order, while I get the Cedarbrook Camp on the wire," said Sunny, fishing for a nickel in her purse. The 'phone was an old-fashioned wall affair, next to Kitt's table in the window. She heard the coin tinkle into the machine as she looked up from the menu.

"Two large roast beef sandwiches, with plenty of gravy. Two glasses of milk, two pieces of apple pie, double size, with cheese, and . . ."

Sunny had her number, was talking. ". . . any date in July . . . for the Kitt-Cat Marionettes . . ."

The proprietor was uneasily apologetic. He had, it seemed, been too hasty in his assurances. The apple pie and milk, yes. But no roast beef to-day. The cook had given notice this morning and left half an hour later. He could mix up a nice salad . . .

Something green and crisp? Kitt nodded. Sunny with hand over mouthpiece was keeping Kitt informed in whispers.

Marionettes. . . . The caretaker, who was all alone

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

at the camp just now, didn't seem to know anything about those. Yes, Mr. Cedarbrook did have entertainments, quite often. What's more he had a big hall for them in every one of his five camps. . . .

A little more and Sunny hung up.

"Wait a minute," Kitt re-called the proprietor. "What kind of salad did you say?"

Sunny, full of fresh ambition struck in with, "Oh, Kitt, that's *five* camps. If we got one, I'll bet we could get 'em all. What gorgeous luck!"

A brief pause when everything seemed to stand still, as the proprietor opened his mouth. Kitt almost knew what was coming.

"Salmon salad. Nice canned salmon," said Mine Host proudly.

Chapter Eight

A HAT IN THE WIND

SUNNY slid the little car to the curb and pulled out the ignition key. "Ask in the drug store where this Cedarbrook person lives, will you, Kitt? Then if it's not far we'll leave the car and walk. I'd like to stretch my legs and think out a good sales talk, one that no mere man can resist."

Kitt laughed as she slammed the car door. In a moment she returned with the information that Mr. Cedarbrook's house was only three blocks down this same street, a "white house with green blinds that you just couldn't not see, miss."

It was a bright windy day with a sky full of scudding clouds and rocking lilacs in front yards ready to burst into bloom. Kitt clung to the severe little black hat that topped her brown curls; Low Jinks woofed his appreciation of this freedom and, twinkling along beside them, shook his head to keep his long silk ears right side out to the breeze.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

"You do look grand and grown-up." Kitt's sidelong glance at Sunny was slightly envious. No amount of borrowed finery, Mom's new spring hat, even her own most severely tailored suit, could make Kitt's round brown eyes anything but young and excited, and her feet felt a tendency to dance, regrettable in a dignified young business woman. So if they wished the Kitt-Cats to be taken with due solemnity, it must be Sunny who should appear as head of the firm. Kitt herself had done all she could to avoid this forthcoming interview. After all, they weren't professionals in the marionette business; they didn't need this booking nor the four which, Sunny brightly insisted, might follow it, in order to eat. But now that she had forced herself into it . . . well, Sunny had done a bit of persuading, too! . . . it seemed all the more necessary to make it a success. Like taking a horrid medicine. Once you've held your nose and forced yourself to it, you do expect it to cure everything thereafter.

Cars whizzed past, girls in bright coats and sweaters were blown like leaves along the clean walks, and chestnuts budded overhead. They had come to the beginning of the third block. Kitt, looking for a white house with green blinds, was wondering what was behind that tall picket fence with its decoratively high hedge of blowing lilacs, when a man passed them. They wouldn't have noticed him particularly if it hadn't been for his hat; nor his hat if it hadn't been

A HAT IN THE WIND

for the wind. But suddenly the headgear whiffed by, a tantalizing missile of gray felt, not six feet above Low Jinks's quivering nose. With a flurry the wind whirled it higher, turned it over, and with a final puff the thing vanished over the lilac hedge.

"Jinks! Jinks! Come back here," Kitt commanded in masterful tones. Commanded in vain. Low Jinks had possessed an owner for only a few weeks, and generations of ancestors were urging him to the chase. He was after the hat with a grin and a woof of delight. Not dramatically over the hedge, that was impossible for a dog of his breed and a hedge of such dimensions; but earnestly and practically under, with a wriggle and a flip and a farewell ecstatic wriggle of a thin black tail.

Kitt turned round anxious eyes to the man. "Oh, dear!" she wailed in tones completely at variance with the mature borrowed garments in which she had come job hunting. "I never knew him to be like this before. What should we do?"

"It's no matter at all. Really . . ." the hatless one was beginning. A pleasant man with a bronzy outdoor sort of face, and thick gray hair ruffled by the breeze.

"Oops! He's got it! He's got his foot on it!" Sunny, forgetting to be grown-up and, with face close to the picket fence, was relaying news from the field. "Your dog's a swell retriever, Kitt. Never guessed he was so talented. Now he's bringing it back!"

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

Kitt flopped on her knees on the flags and peered between the lilac stems. She could see Jinks, hat held in mouth, head high to keep the brim from dragging before his short twinkling legs as he rushed triumphantly for the hedge. His eyes were impish with pride. Gracious! If he tried to squeeze through the way he had gone there wouldn't be much left of the man's headgear. Kitt shouted firmly:

"Drop it, Jinks! Drop it, I say!"

At the familiar voice the little dog paused and glanced anxiously around. Could it be possible that he was mistaken? That the man didn't want his beautiful hat after all this fuss and bother? Then he caught sight of his mistress and came on, driving the misshapen felt between the stems of the bushes, oozing blithely after it. Kitt commanded again:

"Drop it, Jinks!"

"Oh, please don't bother. I can . . ." begged the man behind her, starting toward the gate.

"But he's got to learn to obey," explained Kitt with stern gravity, and for the moment regardless of the hat. Of course, nobody had any idea that the dachshund knew how to fetch and carry like this. How could one, on such short ownership? Just at the other side of the hole through which he had entered, Jinks paused, dropping his burden. Reproachfully, reluctantly. But there it was; she could take it or not, he had done his full duty. He wriggled through. Kitt reached a long arm and picked up the hat.



"Drop it, Jinks! Drop it, I say!"

A HAT IN THE WIND

"But please don't trouble, I can so easily . . ." said the man behind her, still protesting.

"It's no trouble." Kitt glanced reassuringly over her shoulder. "I won't drag it through. We can get it this way, I think." And slowly, with great care, inch by inch, she began to pass it up from hand to hand, her fingers reaching through the narrow spaces between the palings. "Now if you can reach it from the top . . ." she said. And a moment later Jinks was being patted for his feat and told he mustn't do it again, and the man was somewhat ruefully brushing the hat with his sleeve. It seemed rather a new hat.

"That's quite all right. It isn't hurt. I am very grateful." He appeared amused, and indeed Low Jinks was a cunning thing. Still on her knees on the sidewalk, Kitt beamed appreciation. Quite forgetting her usual shyness she asked, "Could you tell us where—that is, we're looking for the house of a Mr. Cedarbrook. They told us at the drug store that it's somewhere in this block."

"Why I'm—it's right here. This is it." The man indicated the house beyond the lilac hedge.

"Oh, thank you," said Kitt, scrambling up. Sunny seemed to be signaling with her eyebrows. Kitt frowned, wondering, but went on. "We want to see Mr. Cedarbrook. . . ."

"Yes?" said the man. "Won't you come in then?" And he led them the short distance to the gate, opened

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

it for them to enter. Kitt stepped through, followed by Low Jinks and Sunny.

"You see," he explained, suppressing a grin of amusement. "I am Mr. Cedarbrook. And this is my house. What can I do for you?"

Chapter Nine

PROFESSIONALS

THEY always chose the library of Sunny's house in which to work. This morning the daffodil yellow sunlight streaming across the wide floor added to the elation they felt over having landed the first Cedarbrook order. Really, it hadn't been difficult. Kitt had shown some good photographs of the puppets, just as she had shown them in the past to sell her marionettes. Sunny had had clippings, two of them praising the Merida High School performance. Those had brought forth interest, if not an actual order at the time. Mr. Cedarbrook asked for a little time to think it over. And this morning's mail had contained a letter to Kitt with their second real engagement of the summer.

The library was perfect for their work. Lovely because of the view through open windows; budding trees, the wide lawn dotted with daffodils and alive

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

with birdcalls; useful, too, because here small rugs could be kicked back, leaving a bare floor easily cleared of whatever litter of threads, snippets of costumes or other débris was shed by the workers. The big leather chairs and couch offered no harbor for odd bits of fluff and leavings from a puppet; the wide overhang of the top bookshelf, above shoulder height, was just right to hold a marionette control, weighted with heavy books, while you tied strings and adjusted the balance of the puppet. Kitt was stringing to-day, Sunny trying out the poise of the little figures as they were made ready.

"I think the new sailor would be better with the seat string farther down his spine," suggested Sunny. "He won't look quite so stiff and dignified."

The room was remote and quiet, the windows open to late afternoon and spring, with a robin calling rain somewhere in the maples down at the end of the lawn and the hushed purr of passing auto tires on the road below the garden. Kitt loved to bring her "knitting" here, as Sunny called her constant small jobs, for nowadays she never seemed to move, outside school, without a marionette under one arm or both. Now that Dad had only a part-time job, drafting for the architect's office in which he used to be chief architect before the business was taken over by a bank, the Newcomb house appeared always to be full of parents and business.

Kitt threaded a heavy needle with black shoemaker's

PROFESSIONALS

silk, double F, and picked up Sojo, a little black pick-aninny. She had finished making him into a doll yesterday. But he still had to be turned into a marionette and be given the power of expression and movement. With needle pointing downward she took a single, deep stitch behind his left ear, slipped the thread from the needle and knotted the free end of it. She stood up and measured the string to the top of the bookshelves which from experience the girls had found the exact height for the headstring, including the height of the bridge. Six inches were allowed for tying or altering, and Sojo dangled, leaded feet just touching the floor.

She sat down and adjusted the string back of the right ear, to match. These strings would be knotted to the ends of the second crossbar of the control. Hand strings belonged on the shorter, front bar; the single seat string at the back end of the control. Knees or legs were on the extra, removable crosspiece which the right hand would manipulate. Sunny, who was more in need of practice than her partner, was still putting the new sailor through his paces. With the main control in her left hand, the knee piece in her right, and both hands moving simultaneously, she walked him across the floor. The right hand tilted the knee piece up and down, the left advancing the main control, turning it slightly from side to side. On the main control was a small peg on which the knee piece could be slipped if the manipulator wanted the

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

puppet to stand or sit still and if she needed her own right hand free for other work. When the puppet had only to remain inactive, the control would be swiftly caught over a large wire hook above the stage and a brief occasional touch of the puppeteer's hand on the strings would give the small actor a gesture of listening or dissent.

Mr. Fairweather must have been standing in the doorway for more than a minute when Kitt became aware of him and glanced up.

"I suppose," he remarked, "that's one of those things that looks easy as pie, till you come to try it. By the way, how did the Cedarbrook contact work out? Any luck?"

The sailor in Sunny's hand gave a little gesture of bewilderment. "Well—" said Sunny, "we got a kind of trial engagement, which was pretty decent of him, after what we did to his hat."

"How do you mean?" asked Sunny's father, sinking into one of the wide leather chairs and taking out his pipe. "Sat on it, or something?"

"No." Kitt jabbed a needle heartlessly into one of Sojo's hands and tied a knot in the string. "Worse. Much worse! We almost demolished it before his very eyes. Low Jinks and I. And he stood there and just said, 'Thank you.'" Briefly she related the story. "Of course, we were trying so hard to be helpful. But Low Jinks wasn't mascoting very well that day."

PROFESSIONALS

Mr. Fairweather didn't seem to think it was so awful, in fact he stretched out in his chair and roared. But then it hadn't been his hat. Nor was he financially concerned in the success of Kitt-Cat and Company.

"He didn't take a terrific chance," Sunny explained, referring back to Mr. Cedarbrook. "He only gave us a trial performance at the nearest camp. And only that after a pretty stiff examination on puppets, their life history and pedigree, and how we happened to be in the business in the first place."

But Mr. Fairweather suggested that it probably wouldn't be necessary for them to go through that every time they wanted to get an engagement; their past performances would speak for them. They'd soon get a reputation, and really ought to have a printed list of their program and where they had already played.

Kitt's eyes were wide with surprise. "We've only given one paid performance. And have one other besides this chance ahead."

But how, asked Sunny's father, curiously persistent, had they really sold Mr. Cedarbrook on the idea?

"We didn't sell him." Sunny, perched on the arm of the couch, idly dangled her puppet from its control. "We showed him photos and two press clippings and gave him the Merida Junior High as reference, Mrs. Cutler specially, and I imagine he wrote along to them. Anyway, Kitt got a letter this morning with the good news. We wanted to charge him fifteen dol-

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

lars for a performance, but he thought that was too much, so we're to take twelve. That won't be bad if we can get the whole five engagements."

Sunny's father was head of a big insurance firm in town so it was natural that the financial side of their show should interest him. "Twelve dollars seems fair enough, and, if I were you, I'd keep your price down while you are still trying to build a clientele. You can put it up later when you have more to offer." His tone was pleasantly respectful. "That would make seven engagements, with what you've had, wouldn't it?"

Kitt shuddered, thinking of six more nightmares like the Merida High. She wished that both Sunny and her father wouldn't talk as though the Kitt-Cats were going into this in a big way. And even if they did keep these five or six engagements this summer, there'd be no chance of carrying on next year when Sunny was in college. She tied the last knot in Sojo's control and lifted it to guide him across the floor.

"What does that gadget do?" asked Mr. Fairweather, getting out of his chair to watch more closely.

Kitt demonstrated with the strings, showing how she tilted her hand this way and that, made Sojo kneel, supplicate, dance, even turn a somersault. Then she pressed the controls into his somewhat reluctant hand.

And to his obvious delight the puppet managed at least to walk. "You've got him well trained already," said Mr. Fairweather.

PROFESSIONALS

Sunny grinned. "Can't we draft you into the Kitt-Cats, Dad?"

"I couldn't go on tour, and anyway I'm no actor, but—I've got an idea. Don't you need a business manager and financial advisor, somebody with a resounding title and no hard work to do?"

Sunny seemed delighted, but Kitt's reaction was more dubious. Not, she explained, that she doubted Mr. Fairweather's ability or interest, and it'd be grand to feel he was behind them, but again it seemed to her that they were putting the marionette show on too professional a basis.

"Professional?" Surprisingly he picked up the word. "Well, why not professional?" Sunny, too, had emphasized that word before. "You can have just as much fun with it, but it takes you out of the class of the half-baked amateurs, who don't know whether they're making money or losing it. Of course, I may be wrong. . . ." His eyes twinkled. "But I assume you'd both like to earn a little money. Sunny always runs through her allowance before the month is out, and I believe you've got some idea of helping with your college fees?"

That was tactful of him. Mr. Fairweather must know that Kitt didn't stand the ghost of a chance of getting to college unless she earned her own way. He was still talking, but for the moment she lost track of what he was saying while glorious, impossible vistas opened before her: all those wild dreams which she

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

had so sternly put behind her since the failure of Dad's office. Impossible no longer? Improbable, highly improbable, of course, but . . . Anyway it would be better than sinking money into marionette after marionette. Instead of paying for her hobby, her hobby could pay for itself.

Mr. Fairweather had gotten down to details. "I'd suggest you start a combined banking account, in the company name of the Kitt-Cats. I'll prime the pump with the cash value of your stock in hand, if you want to be businesslike, and if you have the figures on that."

Kitt nodded emphatically. She had all those figures down in a little notebook: just what each puppet had cost from the very beginning; how much they had paid Bill for his materials for the stage; what Sunny had put out in license plates for Wallace's car and in back drop materials, curtains and crayons. That part would be easy.

"Good! You can repay me out of your profits at the end of the season. But you'll have to have this small working capital. For instance, you'll need a new tire, at least one, for the company car, unless you're to risk missing an engagement."

Yes, and Bill had already wanted to fix new spotlights and flood lights, with color effects, and now they had some money in the bank. . . . Seeing Sunny's face aglow with similar inspiration Kitt checked herself. They'd have to go slow if they were going to make enough out of the season to repay the debt!

PROFESSIONALS

"You'll want some printed letterheads and perhaps a little local advertising. But I suggest we call a business conference, get Bill into it, too, for amount and quality of supplies and see what you feel is indispensable. It'll be good for Sunny, a little business training to counterbalance all this social fluff and ribbons."

Kitt knew that Sunny's début was not Mr. Fairweather's idea, but her mother's. Not much danger, however, of Sunny's becoming merely a social butterfly; Kitt knew her partner perhaps a little better than did her partner's parents.

But . . . *College!*

"How much," asked Kitt, elbows on knees, chin in hands and going suddenly all practical, "do you suppose we could make out of this? If we were really professional about it, I mean."

Sunny's father couldn't say. Nobody, he said, could tell. It would all depend on how many dates they could pile up for the summer, and how businesslike they were about it.

"Then that means," said Kitt, "that we'll have to go after engagements, instead of trying to dodge them the way I've been doing."

Sunny in the depths of a big chair chuckled in wicked satisfaction. "Exactly!" said she.

It was a complete swing about for Kitt. "College" had done it. With a goal like that to work toward, what miracles she would perform in the way of routing stage fright, conquering shyness, fighting her main

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

enemies of pessimism and dismay! She felt all of a sudden that she could even go out alone and beard a wholly shadowy Mr. Cedarbrook in his office, demand as a right those other four engagements on the sheer strength of her determination and belief in herself and the marionettes. But it did seem a lot to ask of Sunny's father, that he believe in them so much and take so much work into his own hands.

"Not at all," he said firmly. "Actually I owe you two a large debt of gratitude."

Sunny looked blank. "For what, Dad?"

"A friend in British Columbia once sent me a most generous gift. We kept it down here in the cellar until it began to haunt us. Then I had the bright idea of shipping it up to camp. But . . .," he looked very solemn, "for the past two years it has nearly wrecked my vacation there. There was always the danger that some one would discover it; people have such weird ideas as to what is food for human beings and what isn't fit to be eaten. They might," his voice dropped to an anxious whisper, "even open a can some night and serve it for dinner."

"Oh!" cried Kitt. "The salmon!"

"It was such a relief," Mr. Fairweather edged toward the doorway, "to know that you and my daughter were so appreciative of its value. I can only hope that this summer you'll return and finish off the case."

"*Dad!*" Sunny was rising to follow him, a pillow in either hand, vengeance in her eyes. But the door

PROFESSIONALS

closed swiftly and firmly. From the other side came a chuckle.

“If you get hard up on the road this summer, be sure and let me know. I’ll have a supply shipped to you anywhere!” came his departing voice.

Chapter Ten

AT CEDARBROOK

NOT Sunny's high school graduation, not Kitt's elevation into the rarefied atmosphere of a potential senior, not even Sunny's entrance examinations for college, passed with all honors and the traditional flying colors, seemed as important this year as the crystallization of Kitt-Cat and Company.

Long before July, Wallace's car was equipped with one new tire and the old one on back for a spare, and Kitt was the proud owner of a driving license of her own, so that on tour she might take turns with Sunny at the wheel. By July, too, big brother Bill had finished his work on the car body. The windows at the back and sides were protected with frames of strong wood, the back seat had been removed and a wooden screen built on the floor. On this rested the sample cases, the long canvas case that held the proscenium tubes, a case of back drops and another of stage properties:

AT CEDARBROOK

those doll-sized trunks, barrels, chairs and tables which, scaled to size, were the stage furniture for the company of marionettes. Besides all these were the two suitcases, and on the wide front seat Kitt, Sunny and Low Jinks; in all, a formidable carload.

Meanwhile their reputation had grown almost of its own accord and, even before they were ready to start on tour for the first Cedarbrook performance, there had been a promising letter or two, and, at the last, two engagements in one day, which had almost wrecked the company before it began.

July fifth. A roasting fifth, worse even than the fourth had been.

"I do wish you'd let me drive." Kitt glanced anxiously at the tired droop of Sunny's mouth. "It's a straight road, and I haven't yet used my license," she pleaded.

Sunny managed a smile, but shook her head. "No, I'm all right, thanks." But there was a deepening little frown between her eyes, and when the traffic light let them move once more she gave a sigh of relief.

It wouldn't be quite so bad when the motion of the car created a breeze, even though a hand on the door came away as though scorched, and the car seemed ready to burst into flame. Kitt was reproaching herself for that second show, yesterday. The first, near Merida, had been for a charity lawn party, enthusiasti-

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

cally instigated by the mother of one of their first audience. The same evening, and because the stage and arrangements were already in place, the girls had agreed to give a repeat performance, and at a reduced rate. It was thrilling to be able to meet so enthusiastic a demand. But it was that double performance that had been too much for Sunny.

"Headache?" Kitt's voice was sympathetic.

"Splitting," said Sunny briefly. "Darn! Why didn't that prize idiot signal that he was going to turn in there!" She brought the car back with a jerk, swung out into her lane again and pressed on the gas. They shot ahead. "Five more miles, they said, then up a side road to the left. Got the letter there?"

So much depended on this first Cedarbrook engagement. But with half the company down with a headache, Kitt felt far from hopeful.

Ah, there was the sign!

"Cedarbrook Lodge" indicated a double line of high, arched elms between which they approached an old farmhouse, white with blue shutters and pretty chintz curtains. Beyond and above it, along the pine-clad hillside, small cottages bunched like ducklings about their mother. Sunny brought the big car to a stop and let her hands drop from the wheel, her head fall back against the seat.

"Whew! Well, that's over. Can you carry on for a bit, honey? I'll be all right, once I've had a bath and a rest."

AT CEDARBROOK

At the door a pretty maid in green and white received the letter which Mr. Cedarbrook had given them for Mrs. Coles, the matron, and in a moment returned to conduct Kitt to the woman's office.

"Oh, yes." A short, square person with pugnacious chin and an unwelcoming mouth glanced up, her eyes sharp behind spectacles. "You're that puppet show, aren't you? Sheer nonsense! The girls have plenty to amuse them." Then grudgingly, "But it's Mr. Cedarbrook's affair, of course."

Kitt stood waiting, though her heart sank in foreboding. The next announcement, however, was more cheerful.

"Mr. Cedarbrook will be here this evening. You're to give your performance . . .," she sniffed ungraciously, "in the main council and dining hall. The maid will show you." And, as Kitt still did not move, added in reluctant tones, "I suppose you'll want to see your room first. Our guest house is full, so many of the girls have just arrived and with their parents. But I can give you a small room, along the hall in this house."

"Oh. Thank you," murmured Kitt, but was forced to add, "We've got a dog with us. Quite a small dog and very well behaved. . . . I suppose he could sleep in the car."

The matron waved a hand of dismissal. "See that he doesn't bark," was her farewell.

Now to get Sunny into a cool place where she could

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

rest, and then to prepare the stage. Sunny had gone as far as the hallway, leaning against a table, her arms full of coats and scarfs, the table beside her littered with maps, their purses and oddments. As the maid came to show them their room, Sunny gathered up the lot and followed listlessly. Once inside she dumped her load on a convenient chair and flung herself full length on the bed.

"Glory, what a day!" she murmured, dragging off her hat. "I'd give my back teeth for some tea, Kitten. Sorry to be such a complete flop."

When Kitt departed, Sunny was already half asleep in the cool room, her bright hair loosened over the pillow. Unpacked bags were still on the floor, the coats, just as she had tossed them, on the chair.

The next thing was to look at the hall. It was long and spacious, and the acoustic qualities were good, but Kitt surveyed it despairingly. Down the full length of the low ceiling ran a heavy, decorative beam. If they used the high stage, which they must, and the bridge raised behind that, that beam would come just where one had to pass back and forth across the bridge, and the performance would be a continual dodging of the beastly thing. Oh, well, probably one couldn't pick and choose in this business.

"You're the Kitt-Cats, aren't you?" asked a cheery voice behind her. Kitt whirled.

"I'm Arts and Crafts teacher here. Anything I can

AT CEDARBROOK

do?" She was pretty and fluffy and blond, and she said her name was Mathews and that she'd love to be of some help. She produced a smock to cover her white dress; and she brought a handyman named Humphreys, who was strong and black and willing; and in a few minutes the car was unloaded and taken off to the garage. Jinks had found a temporary home in Miss Mathews's little cottage; and life began to seem much brighter.

But, oh, that beam! Kitt adjusted the bridge four times, trying to avoid it, then had to let architecture take its course. There was just no such thing as dodging it, and the afternoon was getting on. Kitt, rehearsing with Sunny, already knew the exact spot for everything and exactly how to set it up; the business of stage setting took an hour and a half, with an extra half hour allowed for fussing, putting up props for special scenes, seeing that each puppet costume was in order, that heads were tight on bodies, that strings hung straight and untwisted from wooden controls. But Miss Mathews, though willing, was unskilled, and to-day's was a long hot task.

For more than an hour Kitt forgot about her partner and concentrated on getting each tube pushed tightly into its socket, front curtains into place, masking curtain behind them.

"Could we get some extra drapes for the sides?" she asked her assistant. "The hall is so wide that the audience at the sides can see backstage."

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

"Would colored bedspreads do? The girls' bedspreads are all alike, of dark blue rep."

Kitt approved the idea and set Miss Mathews to pin these along the side rods, then to removing the marionettes from their slip cases. These she herself arranged on their hangers on each side the stage, in order of their appearance. As she plugged in the electric light and tested it, thinking how blazingly hot it would be to-night with the glare of the footlights thrown up in their faces, a gong sounded from the main house.

"Dinner," announced Miss Mathews. "You won't want it here, with the whole crowd of chattering girls. Come along to my cabin."

Kitt explained about Sunny. "If she needs me, I'd better stay with her. Otherwise I'll be over in a few minutes," she said gratefully and, pausing only to scribble a Do Not Touch sign and pin it on the front curtain, she went off to the main house. On tiptoe she entered Sunny's room, found her fast asleep and closed the door behind her.

Mrs. Coles's voice was raised in expostulation to one of the maids in the lower hallway. "Watch . . . We must find it," was all Kitt heard. Certainly nothing that concerned herself or Sunny. But *where* were the maids to watch, she wondered.

In an hour, when she returned. Sunny was awake. "Hi, Kitt! I'm 'most human again. How's everything going?"

"Everything's grand. Think you can perform to-

AT CEDARBROOK

night? Mr. Cedarbrook is to be here, I think. But you were lucky to miss the matron." She tossed off shorthand notes of the afternoon's impressions. "Seems to think we're some new species of insect. And there's a brute of a beam down through the center of the stage. You'll have trouble with that, I'm afraid." Kitt curled herself on the bed and idly watched Sunny dress.

"You're an untidy creature, aren't you?" she remarked. "You know, I never guessed that before I traveled with you. Oh, heavens, is it almost eight o'clock? Step on it, Sunny. We're due on the stage in half an hour."

By now much of the performance was routine. Lights, music, puppets in order of their appearance; lines and characters all slipped into their respective places without hitch or effort. If it hadn't been for the blazing heat . . . and that accursed beam.

As the evening went on, and in spite of applause, spontaneous laughter and the obvious delight of their audience, the beam became a creature of almost human malignancy and ingenuity, dodging, so it seemed, half across the stage to catch Kitt with a warning tap on her hand, to buffet her not unlightly on the head, to knock from her fingers, already quivering with fatigue, the puppet in her hand. Kitt was trying to save Sunny as much as she could and so crowded her to her end of the bridge. But that, too, was inconven-

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

ient; characters had less room to move; Joey caught his arm in the muslin back drop; Betsy Ross visibly objected to having her spinning wheel jammed into a wing.

Kitt found herself trembling from combined weariness and the nerve strain of avoiding that apparently malevolent timber. It was almost with a feeling of satisfaction that she finally did knock her head a resounding whack. Well, the hateful thing had been pursuing her all evening, perhaps now it would leave her alone.

There came a burst of more than the usual enthusiastic applause from in front, a shout of laughter that could only be Mr. Cedarbrook's hearty amusement. The final curtain. Kitt shook her fist at the beam. Thank heaven, that had done its worst and, in spite of it, the show had been a success; no doubt about that. The other engagements were theirs as soon as she could see Mr. Cedarbrook and book definite dates.

Kitt was scanning the audience for him. Sunny, behind her, was going through a backstage display of the marionettes and how they worked from the bridge, when Kitt heard a sharp thump, a low exclamation, and whirled in time to see Sunny leaning, head in hand, limply against the bridge rail. Oh, that beam again! Kitt flew to her side.

"Hurt yourself? Oh, Sunny! And with your head already so bad! Look here, you go off to bed. I'll

AT CEDARBROOK

just tie up the puppets for to-night and leave the rest till morning."

"Guess I'll have to." Sunny smiled wanly at the girls around her, mumbled an apology and, with Kitt's anxious eyes upon her, disappeared through the door toward the main house.

It was more than an hour until Kitt could get away, and then she left without her talk with the head of the camp. No matter. The Kitt-Cats had been a success, she had heard it over and over this evening, in too many ways to leave a trace of doubt. But a little thorn of anxiety still lingered, something foreboding, ominous.

Kitt tried to shrug it away. Probably it was nothing more than the shadowy memory of that beastly beam, which had tried so hard to ruin the beginning of their professional career. Or was it the thought of Mrs. Coles that worried her? Something, she had said, that the maids were to watch? But the woman would be out of her way to-night. Thank goodness, Kitt congratulated herself, she would get to her room too late to meet the matron. As she turned out the light in the big hall, she checked off, thankfully, the last of the day's bad luck. Nothing more could happen now. Jinks . . . Miss Mathews had taken care of him. The show was over and the beam foiled. Sunny, about whom she had worried, was safe in bed.

Her gratitude was premature. A light still streamed from the living room. Mrs. Coles was there, talking to

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

Miss Mathews and, as Kitt passed the door, the matron called out:

"Please come in Miss . . . Miss Newcomb. I want to speak with you."

Kitt was on the point of pleading the lateness of the hour and her own fatigue, but the woman's tone was too peremptory for Kitt to disregard. She leaned against the door. Queer. That nice Miss Mathews looked as though she had been crying.

Mrs. Coles went directly to the point. A valuable watch was missing, her own watch. She had been passing through the hallway with it in her hand this morning and, on answering the 'phone there, had laid it down. She forgot it, and when she returned for it a half-hour later the watch was gone. Since then the maids had been questioned. None of them had seen it, and in any case she knew and trusted her maids.

"But the hall was quite open. Lots of people went in and out this morning: parents, girls . . ." Kitt was bewildered, uncomfortable, unhappy. And extremely weary. The woman's sharp little eyes snapped behind her glasses.

"We were aware of all that. I just thought I had better tell you . . ." her tone was full of sinister meaning, "in case you were in a hurry to get away in the morning, that the watch must be found before any one leaves this house."

Why how ridiculous! Who would want her old watch anyway! Kitt almost snorted at the threat.

AT CEDARBROOK

“Thank you for telling me,” she said politely. “And now if you’ll excuse me I’ll go up to bed. I do hope you find your watch.” And only Miss Mathews answered her good night.

The room was dim and silent, Sunny already asleep. Kitt tiptoed about, undressing without a light. Across the way some one was playing a phonograph, and flitting shadows of dancing girls moved softly across the window shade. Kitt looped back the curtains, slipped out of dress, shoes and stockings and stood for a moment enjoying the cool floor beneath her feet. If only she could have a shower! Better not, she might waken Sunny. Oh, dear, there were Sunny's hat and coats just as she had bundled them out of the car.

Kitt crossed the floor, picked up the garments and started to fold them. As she did so, something crashed on the boards. She stooped, fumbling around the legs of the chair, and her fingers touched an object round and hard and cool. A faint ticking met her ear. Sunny's watch? How did it get here? Kitt moved to the window, the coat over her arm, the watch in her hand.

Not Sunny's watch, small and square and simple, but a large affair, of gold, heavily engraved, set round with diamonds.

Kitt gasped and an icy stream of horror seemed to chill her clear to her toes. How did that get here? For it was precisely the watch Mrs. Coles had just described!

Chapter Eleven

MORE STRINGS

FOR a moment too stunned to think, Kitt stood still with the watch in her hand. She was conscious of the chill floor beneath her bare feet, of Sunny's breathing, of the wind rustling a curtain behind her. Footsteps passed along the corridor, a door closed somewhere, and belowstairs a light was turned out; steps crunched on the gravel path outside. Then she came to, sufficiently to reason.

That must be Mrs. Coles going to her room for the night, Miss Mathews returning to her own cabin. Kitt gaped at the small object in her hand. Behind her, Sunny turned with a sigh and slept on, oblivious. It was pretty obvious what had happened; Sunny had come into the house with an armful of sweaters and coats and scarfs from the back of the car, had simply dropped them, all in a pile, on the hall table; then

MORE STRINGS

later had gathered them up in the same disorderly fashion and brought them upstairs. The watch had been carried along in the folds. If Kitt hurried, she could take the beastly little thing right along to the matron's room. Now. Immediately. Yes, that was the proper thing to do.

Reason nudged her. Hurry up, it said sharply. Don't be a little idiot.

"Oh, shut up!" Kitt said to Reason, crossly. She was too weary to listen, too tired to face the unpleasant matron alone, with no backing of Sunny's bright, unworrying cheerfulness. In the morning, yes, with the sun streaming in, after a good night's sleep, and with the support of her partner. Kitt giggled and thrust the ticking evidence into her bag. Let 'em find it, if they wanted to search the house. But according to all the best detective tales, wouldn't they need a search warrant or something?

She slid into bed beside Sunny and was asleep almost before her head touched the pillow. Reason gave a baffled sigh and slunk away into a corner.

Kitt awoke to find broad daylight, and a note stuck on the pillow beside her.

"Cheerio, old bean! See you over the bacon and eggs!"

Kitt sat up and shook the hair out of her eyes. So Sunny had dressed without waking her. Then with a bump she remembered the watch. Softly she got out

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

of bed and, feeling like the Burglar's Accomplice, crossed to the table and her purse. Yes, it was still there and still ticking.

Now, in full daylight, she rather wished she had taken it to the matron last night. In any case the woman was pretty sure to be as disagreeable as possible. Kitt considered the matter as she combed out her curly brown tangle, dabbed on powder, slid her feet into blue socks and white gillies, slipped into a fresh blue-and-white gingham dress. There didn't seem to be much chance of their getting the other four Cedarbrook Camp engagements now. Certainly Mrs. Coles wouldn't recommend it. And as for Mr. Cedarbrook, if he ever really heard the truth of this matter, which seemed unlikely, no one could tell how he would react to it. He probably wouldn't want to engage a marionette show with a . . . what did they call it . . . criminal record? Did this mean the end of a promising Kitt-Cat season?

Kitt was trying to laugh at herself about it; it had all been such a stupid bit of business. With anybody else except Mrs. Coles she wouldn't have worried for an instant. A simple explanation would have been enough. Before she went out, she glanced round the room again. It showed evidence of Sunny's cheerful carelessness: a scarf here, her coat and hat still on the table, the contents of her bag tumbled and tossed. Kitt returned to pick up a pair of pajamas from the floor, then closed the door behind her.

MORE STRINGS

From the dining room below sounded Sunny's high sweet voice.

" . . . so then he must have gone round to the kitchen. And cook felt so-o sorry for the poor little starved dog that she gave him a big plate of fish. The third victim was the maid. Jinks cast starving eyes in her direction, and she came across with a huge dish of oatmeal and milk. When I came down to breakfast he was looking so famished that I took pity on him and let him have half my breakfast bacon. In less than an hour he had done the vanishing trick with just four breakfasts!"

A shout of laughter, masculine laughter. That, thought Kitt with a feeling of vast relief, would be Mr. Cedarbrook. She waited a moment outside the door, weighing the watch in her hand. To be apologetic would mean to be trodden underfoot by Mrs. Coles. Otherwise . . . Kitt felt a panic desire to return on some pretext to the bedroom and leave the miserable timepiece there for Sunny to explain. Then, committing her cowardly self to a forward movement, she pushed open the dining room door and entered.

"Did I hear some one say 'vanishing trick'?" she began gaily. "Well, if any one in the audience will lend me a hat . . ."

Mr. Cedarbrook had risen courteously from his seat at the table. "Let me see now . . . a hat? I had a hat once . . ."

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

A chuckle from Sunny. Mrs. Coles glanced up with a close-lipped "Good morning."

"Well, lacking a hat—" Kitt wanted desperately to come to the point, to get through with this. "I will run the risk of my trick being detected. Presto . . ." She swung her arm dramatically above her head and let her closed fist descend to an inch above the table. "One gold watch set with countless diamonds." Laying it in full view upon the table, she sank into her chair, and with difficulty resisted the desire to hide behind her napkin.

But the trick had been turned; there had been no apology, no admission on which Mrs. Coles could hang her idiotic suspicions . . . Only Sunny looked blank:

"What . . . where . . . how, Kitt? *We* don't own any diamonds."

Kitt explained. It was easier, now that she had established the rôle of cheerful innocence, and she was telling Sunny, not the suspicious Mrs. Coles. "One of us must have picked it up with the things left on the hall table, when we came in yesterday."

"Gosh, that must have been me." With no knowledge of Mrs. Coles's murky suspicions, Sunny babbled on, "Lucky I didn't drop it, I should have felt *so* guilty!"

"Guilty?" Mrs. Coles's fishlike eye glanced over her.

But Mr. Cedarbrook, undoubtedly as relieved as Kitt, put back his head and shouted with laughter. Between gusts of mirth he gasped, "You two seem to

MORE STRINGS

have a remarkable . . . remarkable faculty . . . ho . . . ho! ha, ha, ha! oh, dear! . . . of finding things and returning them to their rightful owners!"

And then and there, almost as though in challenge to Mrs. Coles's indignant disapproval, Mr. Cedarbrook discussed dates and fees and clinched four more bookings of the Kitt-Cat Marionettes.

Chapter Twelve

A LOST LETTER

THE cards were Kitt's idea. Fifty of them, dark blue on pale green to match the Kitt-Cat Company's curtains. They had made out a list of all camps, schools and summer hotels within possible driving distance, canvassed their friends with the list, and as a result struck off two thirds of these but starred a dozen special prospects. Then they consulted Mr. Fairweather. Was this sufficient reason to draw on the special Kitt-Cat fund?

"Yes, indeed," he said. "You'd put it down as publicity; seed for a future harvest." And he sent them with a note to his own company's printer, who treated their small order with becoming gravity, brought out books of sample cards, and promised them the completed product within two days.

"Now, look, Sunny," Kitt figured, "fifty cards to fifty people. At least four other people will see each

A LOST LETTER

one—we'll make it three. That makes two hundred people. And out of four hundred at very least, we ought to get fifty inquiries. Between now and school in the fall, with fifteen dollars an engagement . . ."

"Here, here! It's running away with you," Sunny had scoffed. But seemed impressed nevertheless.

The cards read:

*The Kitt-Cat Marionette Company of Liskeard
Presents Its Compliments
And is prepared to make engagements
For the Months of July and August.*

REPERTOIRE: REVUES FOR BANQUETS AND DANCES. SPECIAL
ENTERTAINMENT FOR CAMPS AND JUVENILE AUDIENCES.
Rates on Request.

"Revues for Banquets and Dances"—Kitt had added that touch thinking it sounded sumptuous.

And then two weeks passed. Without a nibble. Two long, precious weeks of the summer holidays with the car waiting in the garage, waiting to take them hither or it might be yon. And nothing at all happened.

Kitt had been trying to put it all out of her mind. Maybe the expense had been unjustified. Maybe it had been a silly idea from the beginning, and her spirit sank lower and lower. But she couldn't leave marionettes completely alone.

She was working on a new clown, a larger, jollier Joey, when Sunny came into the Newcomb living room waving a letter.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

"Hi, Kitt! Hot, isn't it? Like to hear some news?"

Kitt frowned in concentration and took three pins out of her mouth. Deliberately she stuck them into the clown's ruff. Oh, dear, that wasn't right, either. She'd tried it this way, she'd tried it that, but the ruff slumped flat every time. Maybe the puppet was too fat, after all; she'd been trying a new pattern.

"What say?" she mumbled uncomfortably around more pins.

Sunny's wide hat skimmed across toward the couch, which it missed, landing atop Low Jinks, who wriggled out from under it, very coy, tail at one end, laugh at the other, and waddled away through the door. Sunny folded her long legs by the window where there might be a breeze.

"News, woman. I told you. Perhaps a date this time."

Kitt sat up with such a bounce she nearly swallowed the pins. "A date . . . oh!" Removing the pins she began again, "A date? Where? . . . When? . . . How soon?"

Sunny held up a hand intended to impress, and began to read aloud, skipping the unimportant bits. "*Dear Child . . . so glad to be able to arrange this for you . . . Seem delighted at the idea . . . told them how good you were . . . be sure to let them know immediately.*"

"Yes. But *when . . . where?*" interrupted Kitt.

"All in good time. There's a letter enclosed from the

A LOST LETTER

people 'emselves. A hotel. On the lake somewhere." Her hand waved the envelope.

It must be really good news if Sunny could afford to be so aggravating. Kitt returned to measuring and basting the little clown's ruff, but with one ear cocked eagerly.

"*Affectionately . . . Aunt Emma,*" concluded Sunny. "And, dear little boys and little girls," she said with a flourish and unfolded the enclosure, "it's from . . ."

"Jinks, Low *Jinks!*" Kitt's squeal was of horror and dismay. "Put it down, sir! Down, I say!"

Low Jinks waddled across the floor and placed a white kitten at her feet. His mouth was wide with dachshundish glee, his little black eyes snapped, "Please, Mistress Kitt, don't you think I'm clever? I found it all by myself."

"O-o! Is it hurt?" Sunny, dropping the letter on the table, flew to pick up the small bundle of white fluff. But Low Jinks forestalled her. With an air of Pardon-me-madame, he gently grasped the neck of the unprotesting small cat and padded away with it, down the hall. The kitten on her part was not only unharmed but completely unconcerned over this unusual canine transport. How comical Jinks did look! Holding their sides with laughter, they followed. But where was he bound?

Oh, yes, the kitchen. What? . . . Why?

His own food bowl was in the corner by the door. The kitten, still unprotesting, was deposited firmly on

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

its four minute legs and Jinks looked up with an explanatory tail wag. The kitten, he indicated, was no doubt famished. Here was the receptacle. Now fill it, please.

With screams of delighted mirth they gave it cream from the ice box, and flopped on the floor to watch the small pink tongue lapping greedily. Kitt had just bestowed a pat of approval on the gallant Low Jinks, but was warning him, "You must, my noble hound, get rid of these base, retriever traits in your makeup," when there came a peremptory thump at the screen door. Some one tugged it open.

"They told me that an enormous black dog . . ."

The voice was masculine, indignant and breathless; the hair red, the nose freckled, the shoulders broad, the brown eyes snapping with wrath. It was that "enormous black dog" however that tickled Kitt. Especially as at the precise moment the kitten chose to think Low Jinks had approached too closely to her cream and turned on him with a miniature hiss of warning. Low Jinks, being a little gentleman, discreetly retreated.

Kitt's gesture introduced them. "Your 'huge black dog,' Mister. His name is Low Jinks. I presume the gigantic and ferocious feline is your own." Her dimple twinkled at him.

"Oh, but say . . ."

Red haired people blush so easily that Kitt was sorry for him. "You're the new boy from next door?"

A LOST LETTER

Have a doughnut; I made 'em myself. And this is Miss Fairweather, known as Sunny Fairweather. I'm Kitt Newcomb, your new neighbor. I think refreshments are in order."

They trailed back to the living room, each with ice tinkling in a tall glass of lemonade, Kitt with the doughnuts, Peter French with his kitten. Low Jinks sank with a sigh onto the rug; the kitten, full of virtue and cream, began to take a bath on the hearth rug. The marionettes were introduced.

A puppet show? No, Peter had never seen one, but he certainly knew the Kitt-Cat Company by reputation.

Sunny in the window seat bounced a tennis ball. Kitt, finishing her drink, set it down on the floor and picked up the clown again. She could sew while she talked.

Peter was telling about a tennis match, to come off that afternoon between Merida and Liskeard. "I went to Merida High last term, was head of the tennis team last season. Now the crowd over here have asked me to play on the Liskeard team. Gosh, how I'd like to beat those Merida babies!" His red hair stood almost upright in his enthusiasm.

One needed something to stiffen the ruff, thought Kitt, absently pleating it between her fingers. Perhaps a piece of paper. She rummaged in the waste basket, found a stiff bit, cut it to size, folded the material over it. Her quick needle flew in and out.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

"If you two could come and watch the match, and sort of . . . er . . . be mascots . . ." he suggested. Except for the boys whom he'd just met, and who'd invited him because they knew about his tennis, he hardly knew a soul in town.

Sitting back to regard the small clown, Kitt's glance encountered Sunny's. Of course, if they went to the match they could introduce Peter to every one. . . . Kit and Sunny had lived in Liskeard all their lives. Well, why not? Might be fun. He seemed like some one you'd want to know, and he was going to be a neighbor. Kitt's nod was almost imperceptible except to Sunny.

"We'd love it," said Sunny. "Three o'clock, isn't it? On the park courts?"

The kitten in his pocket stuck out a plaintive nose as he departed, and Low Jinks rose courteously to see them to the door.

"Come round some time, old fellow," invited Peter, "and share our kittiration."

"Oh, he'll be round. But more probably to make off with a tennis shoe. He's a retriever at heart," laughed Kitt. Yes, a nice person, this Peter French, quite an addition to Liskeard, she voted, once the front door had closed.

Sunny nodded. What had they been doing when Jinks brought in the kitten? Oh, my heavens, yes! Aunt Emma's letter. "Well, it's this hotel somewhere and we're to let them know right away. She says it's

A LOST LETTER

all in their letter to us. Now where did I put that?"

It should have been on the table. It wasn't. There was the envelope all right and Aunt Emma's letter, but nothing else. Sunny shook the envelope a half dozen times, held it up to the light, shook the letter. Kit removed the cushions in the chairs, first those near the table, then all over the room. Together they trailed out into the kitchen where they had followed Low Jinks and the kitten. Together they explored the outside veranda, the steps, the path, in case it might have blown, somehow, through the open door. Together they trailed back into the living room.

"Well, it was right here when Jinks came in." Sunny flopped down on the floor to look under the couch.

"Are you sure?" Kitt wondered aloud. "Maybe she didn't put it in with the other letter after all."

"But I saw it, myself, with my own eyes," reiterated Sunny, sitting up on her heels. "Didn't you, Kitt?"

Kitt thought a moment. No, she wasn't sure. She'd been busy with the marionette, had scarcely glanced up.

Now began a systematic search over every inch of the living room, more slowly hunting through the places where they thought it wasn't, where it couldn't possibly be. But still hunting. Rugs were shaken out, cushions dislodged from chairs. Sunny unfolded all the paper from the wastebasket, shook it out, page by page. Kitt got down on her knees to search beneath the bookcase,

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

poked into the fireplace, desperately stuck her curly head inside to peer up the chimney.

Hand on brow, smutty of nose, she sat back on the rug and blew the long curl out of her eyes. "So there is something in witchcraft after all!" she murmured, ruffling her hair with a grimy paw. "That's just been *spirited* away! Sunny, are you plumb sure . . ."

"If you say that again I'll slay you with . . . with the waste basket," threatened Sunny, who was now frantically scrabbling through it for the third time. "Do you suppose Peter French could have stuck it into his pocket with the kitten?"

"Just as possible as anything else. But we've got to have that letter; we've simply got to. My goodness . . . suppose it was an actual order for an engagement! What'll I do, run over and call him?"

"Yes. Ask him to come help."

Kitt found the boy steering two men with a bureau up the stairs to the second floor and dragged him back, explaining as she went, "You see it's really terribly important. We sent out cards to advertise the Kitt-Cat Company, the marionettes, you know. And this is the very first nibble we've had from them. It might be a real engagement."

"Oh, but it must be around somewhere, that paper." He was nicely sympathetic. "Sure. I'll find it for you."

Once more they went over the ground, every inch of it. The living room began to resemble the *débris* of

A LOST LETTER

an eighty-mile gale, Peter had turned out his pockets, even Low Jinks, seen racing across the lawn with something suspiciously white in his mouth was chased, run to earth and found to be burying the object with incredible speed and enthusiasm. But when Kitt's hand explored the hole she brought out only a porcelain castor, lost from a piece of furniture.

"I think that belongs to our highboy; a castor was missing."

Peter picked it up. "Mind if I see if it matches?"

"If it does, Low Jinks may claim the highboy," chuckled Kitt. "But if he'd bury that, he might have buried other things."

Hot and tired, by now lost to all reason, they began to dig in other place, any place where the loose earth on the wide lawn showed that Low Jinks, or possibly a squirrel, might have been at work. They found things, too—a handleless cup from the kitchen, four bones in assorted conditions, a buckle from one of Sunny's shoes which she immediately pounced on with a squeal of recognition. And an ancient golf ball. But no sign of any letter. Low Jinks, panting with delight, lent every encouragement to the business of excavation.

Oh, but it was hot! Too discouraged to drag herself up the short flight to the veranda, Kitt, with a curl of brown hair over her eyes, flopped on the bottom step. Sunny patted the cushions of the swing.

"Come up here, out of the sun, goofy, and we'll do a little brain work on this."

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

With Aunt Emma's letter before them, they again went over the ground. But it gave simply no clue at all. Just mentioned the enclosure, that she "had shown the little card to the head of the hotel, and he was quite enchanted at the idea, and wrote right away." And that was all.

It certainly did sound like a real nibble, perhaps even a possible engagement. Kitt thought of college next fall, and of how their bank account had sunk, and of their plans for the summer which had seemed so deflated of late. Oh, dear!

"You're sure the letter really was in the envelope with the other?" began Peter, but at Sunny's glare of wrath pretended to dodge. "All right. Don't hit me. But say—I've got to run. Lunch, and then this tennis match. You will come, won't you, both of you?"

Sure, they'd come. They watched him cross the lawn, his red head bobbing along beyond the hedge.

Kitt had an idea. "Could we get hold of your Aunt by long distance, do you suppose?"

Sunny thought that was worth trying, even though her letter had said that she was leaving town; and went in to 'phone. The long distance call could go down against the Kitt-Cats' current expenses, advanced by Mr. Fairweather, even though the debt was growing! But here again was no luck. The operator reported, "They do not an . . . swer." And Sunny hung up slowly.

"How about a telegram?" Kitt, leaning against the

A LOST LETTER

wall, scratched the back of her ankle with the toe of a shoe. "She must have left some forwarding address."

Sunny thought not. That is, the post office would have it, but not the telegraph office. Every avenue explored, there was apparently nothing left to do but write a letter, putting "Urgent, Please Forward" in the corner, opposite the special delivery stamp, and mailing it. Disconsolately they went off to dress for that tennis match.

Chapter Thirteen

LOW JINKS ACTS

UNDER the blazing sun three tennis courts invitingly extended their well rolled surface inside a cage of netting. The nets were up and some one was measuring the center band with a three-foot rod as Kitt and Sunny arrived. They were just in time to take advantage of the last seats on the three-tiered grandstand of rough, weathered planking. Fans had actually brought car cushions and formed a ring on the grass around the enclosure. Obviously when Liskeard played Merida, grave issues were at stake.

Kitt recognized half the senior and junior classes of both high schools, with a sprinkling of summer visitors, a number of parents and many of the older tennis fans from the country club crowd. Imagine being so busy with marionettes that she and Sunny had forgotten that the match came to-day! Now the heroes themselves trailed across the lawn, in white ducks and

LOW JINKS ACTS

flannels, bright jerseys and sweaters, and were greeted by mild cheers and handclapping. "Hi, Slim . . . H'yere Chummy! . . . Tod! . . . Tod!"

Peter's blazing hair caught the attention of a snub-nosed girl on the front seat. Kitt heard her exclaim, "Why, there's Pete French! You know he won our Merida doubles against Stapleton last year. Now he's playing for Liskeard. Oh . . . oh! That's a pity!"

Shedding sweat shirts and superfluous rackets they went on court, tossed for sides or service. Almost immediately the three separate battlefields were busy.

The high, umpire seats were unoccupied for it was rather a pose, in these inter-village games, that there was enough sportsmanship to make an outside judge unnecessary, and the players kept their own scores. But it was hard for spectators to keep track of more than one game at a time, and some heated arguments took place. "Sure it was, out a mile!" "No, he got the last point, don't you see!"

Games ended, players crossed from side to side. Peter was playing a solid, steady game, just what you'd expect of him, giving away nothing, making his opponents work hard for every point they made. His partner, Ginty McKee, a lank lad with beaky nose and spectacles that glittered in the sun, was taking what Kitt considered too heavy chances. She had played with him and knew his habit of pulling off brilliant strokes and then mistiming easy ones.

With elbows on knees, hat pulled down to shade her

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

eyes, Kitt was pretending an intense interest. But only vaguely did she hear some one yell the tragic news: "Set all! Merida leading five-four!" For something was nibbling at the back of her mind. Her memory, going round and round in circles nagged, "Did I look behind that chair, really?—Couldn't it have got lost in the cushions of the window seat?—I was sure Sunny looked there but may be she didn't—Or would it be possible to trace Sunny's Aunt by 'phoning her friends? . . ." Until suddenly her attention was brought suddenly back to the farthest court.

Peter had just pulled off a seeming impossibility, a recovery in which surely his nose had scraped the gravel, and he had followed up the stroke by opening his wide shoulders and killing his opponent's lob. But after that he became cautious and he and Ginty lost the set. Then they recovered a little and somehow, before Kitt's mind slumped back to worry about the letter, they won a rather dull match.

In the short pause between matches Peter rushed round for a snatch of talk. "Look here, I've been thinking about that letter of yours . . ."

"Oh, yes, Kitt as an idea," said Sunny. "I've been wondering, too, if it might not—"

Somebody shouted, "Merida third pair on court. They're waiting for you, Liskeard." And Peter had to dash off.

"What was that idea of yours? . . ." asked Sunny.

LOW JINKS ACTS

Kitt shook her head. It didn't seem important at the moment.

This time Peter and his long, thin, lugubrious partner were in the nearest court and everything they did was plainly visible. Their opponents, twins, were a deadly pair, seeming to have no gap in their defense, no weak point to be played upon. Together they advanced to the attack, together, when they were lobbed, executed a well-ordered retreat, almost as one man with four arms and four legs and two rackets.

Peter's partner developed the brilliance of despair. But it was the boy with the red hair who covered the long one's weaknesses, scraped seemingly hopeless shots off the stop-netting and dived swiftly back into position.

Each point had to be earned at least ten times over. Yet, to their obvious surprise, Peter and Ginty took the first set, and crawled up, fighting for their lives, to a clear four-one in the second set. By then the other two matches had ended. And Liskeard had won them both. Home team and visitors had tied four-all and on the Peter-McKee combination hung all the hopes of Liskeard.

No one moved or spoke. Kitt's eyes followed the ball, back and forth, back and forth; her fists were clinched tight, tight. Oh, Peter, you've *got* to win this!

The two were slowing down now, playing with more caution, trying to hold their lead.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

Oh, Peter, you can't, you can't play for safety like that! Don't you see that's just what they want?

And they, those solemn, unruffled twins, were profiting. Not an error did they make, not a slip. This cautious poking play was pie for them. Mechanically the points piled up. The games piled up. The score stood four-all.

At last, almost too late, Peter seemed to see. And seeing, changed his tactics. The sluggish, slow moving ball became suddenly alive, swift. Peter and the thin one forced the pace. Took a game. Lost two. Won another. They were winning points by the only way possible, outright scores. Long ago the sun had dropped behind the trees and there was a welcome coolness. But now the light was growing difficult. If some one didn't win the set soon, if this constant see-sawing kept up, it would be too dark to finish the game to-day.

Peter turned on the pressure still more. You could hear the balls hit harder on racket and court; you could see that both pairs were on the halfway line, trying to force their way to commanding position at the net. *Smack, Smack*, and Peter had a game. *Twang, twang, twang*—it seemed impossible that those four swiftly moving figures could really be hitting a ball in the gathering gloom.

And then the twins crumbled. The last set of the last match fell to Liskeard. Victory to Peter!

Kitt let out a great breath which she must have been holding for some time. *Whoof!* She turned to face

LOW JINKS ACTS

Sunny. But Sunny didn't look round; she seemed to be watching something down by the edge of the net enclosure with an expression half horrified, half amused.

Peter had shaken hands all around, was surrounded, with Ginty, by a wildly congratulatory crowd of Meriders and Liskeardites. But Kitt saw him raise his racket in salute and knew that he would come around through the door in the enclosure the minute he could break away.

Sunny was giggling. Good gracious, at what?

"There. Low Jinks!" She pointed.

Low Jinks. And with something in his mouth. For half an instant Kitt's mind returned to the letter. But it wasn't that. Low Jinks had sought them out carrying, of all things, the clown marionette that Kitt had made that morning. It was scuffed as to face and form, and bedraggled, because the dog's short legs had made him haul it over the ground.

"Jinks!" Kitt was cross. Really this was too much!

"Hi! Some mascots, you were! Gosh, that was a game!" Peter had pushed through the crowd. "I'm dead beat. Hope you weren't too bored."

"It was thrilling. I loved it," Sunny assured him. "But after this you won't need any introduction in Liskeard. You'll be the hero of the week. . . . What on earth's the matter with Kitt?" she asked, anxiously.

Kitt had picked up the clown puppet, was doubled over, almost hysterical with laughter.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

"Come down, come down," she cried, "and congratulate our houn' dog! He's found the letter!"

"Where? . . . When? . . . How?" Both voices spoke together.

Kitt spread it out—the torn ruff from the clown doll's neck. Lining it was the piece of paper she had taken from the wastebasket, into which it must have blown. In the dim light they traced the words: "Hotel Merrimac . . . if you will reach us by wire, collect, at once, and verify this date we shall be grateful. . . ."

The date was two days off. So it had been a real engagement after all!

Chapter Fourteen

IMPROMPTU

WHAT I say is, when it rains, let it rain, but this here now lightnin' don't do no good to the crops!" shouted Kitt above the drumming of the storm on the car roof. Sunny, strange creature, with her riotous hair in tight little curls against her cheeks, was actually singing as she dodged mud puddles and struggled against the constant gusts of wind that shook the big car to its four wheels. She was singing and, of all things, a soprano version of "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep"!

Kitt, hating the lightning, shut her eyes tightly and tried to forget it. If only the constant thunder, almost ceaseless, wouldn't draw her attention to the storm! Under no other conditions, she vowed to herself, could she have been induced to leave home and safety on such a day. Opening her eyes between flashes, Kitt drew inspiration from a paper pinned above the wind screen: a list of the Kitt-Cat engagements, starting with the

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

Merida High. Of course that hadn't been necessary; it had been put down only to be crossed off as already dealt with, but it extended the list, made it more important. Then, also crossed off, the two fourth of July dates and, after that, Cedarbrook 1, also with a line through it. Next, Merrimac Hotel, this very afternoon, and with hopeful spaces between them which might be filled by other bookings, Cedarbrook 2, 3, 4 and even 5, and High Trees Lodge, which was the engagement Sunny had booked for August seventh. It really began to look very imposing. If it weren't for those gaps.

Another gust of rain, another flash. Kitt shuddered and closed her eyes. But to-day was the Merrimac Hotel, the first nibble from their announcements, and too good a chance to lose, rain or no rain. Other camp owners around the hotel might be induced to attend, and anyway, now that the Kitt-Cats were real professionals, they must make it a point always to keep their engagements. So this morning they had left in the pouring rain before their respective families had so much as finished breakfast.

Kitt, opening her eyes, was conscious that the car had come to a halt. "Don't tell me we've sprung a leak and are about to sink with all hands!" she exclaimed.

Sunny grinned damply and leaned close to Kitt's ear. "We can stop here for ten minutes, if you're too scared," she said. "Anyway I can't go on like this

IMPROMPTU

much longer; it's too hard to hold the car to the road."

Kitt opened her eyes, shut them again with a snap. "Ouch, that was a terror! Oh, de . . . ar!"

"You ought to sit indoors on a feather mattress with a cork between your teeth. I once had an aunt who did that! Hurray, *there's* a beauty!"

Between momentarily blinding flashes the deserted country road showed, sheeted by rain, flowing full from gutter to gutter, and with the trees on either side creaking and straining in the wind. Low Jinks, cozily cushioned on Kitt's lap, opened his eyes, stretched and yawned lustily, wriggled upright and gazed about. With paws on the back of the seat he thrust an eager nose among the bags at the back.

"No food there, Jinks. Sorry," Kitt told him.

"It's his G. Washington he wants," said Sunny. For of late the little dachshund had conceived a loyal passion for the Washington marionette, so unremitting a devotion that Kitt had been forced to remove its uniform and sword and make a new body for that character in the revue, giving the old puppet to Low Jinks. With that he appeared to be content. Evidently it was the man, not the mere trappings of empty glory, that appealed to his doggish nature.

Kit rescued the puppet from among the bags on the back where it had been thrust just as they were leaving home. With a woof of gratitude Jinks settled his chin on the limp body and closed his eyes happily again. Sunny glanced at her watch.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

"Think we might go on now? There hasn't been a flash for five minutes and the storm seems a little better."

Kitt nodded and the engine started. They began to move slowly forward through the rain.

But a moment later Sunny stopped the car again. "Could you open your window and look out?" she asked. "It pulls as though there's a flat on your side." With her hat off, Kit stuck her head out into the downpour, but was unable to see over the mudguard. She had to throw a raincoat over her head and hop out, in order to verify the horrid suspicion. Yes, they had a flat, one of the very flattest flats she had ever encountered, on the front right side. And the spare at the back, she reminded Sunny, has been left in Liskeard for repairs. She slammed the car door behind her. How cozy and dry it was inside!

"Now what do we do?" she asked. "We've got to get there somehow. Oh, isn't that a farmhouse, up that little lane?"

Sunny thought it was, as well as they could see through the downpour. "Could you run up and ask if any one can mend a puncture? Farm boys can do most anything; they'll probably charge us most of our profit on the performance," she added gloomily.

But repeated hammerings on the house door, as Kitt crouched beneath the sluicing eaves, brought no response. Her feet were soaking, a little more water

IMPROMPTU

in her shoes wouldn't matter. Under cover of the sheltering raincoat, she scuttled along the path to the back door. No need to knock there. Closed and broken shutters proclaimed that the house had long been vacant. With this depressing news she returned to the car.

There was another attempt to run the car on the flat. Sunny took it a few yards, shook her head and stopped. "Can't afford to wreck the tube while there's a chance of getting it patched. There might not be another one the right size anywhere around here."

But Kitt, peering through the windscreen, had a gleam of hope. "I do believe that's a filling station. Look . . . when the wind blows you can see those funny tall things; aren't they pumps?"

Well, it was no use sitting there. And two might prove more persuasive than one. Jinks, voting to be the third, was forbidden to bring along his George and flipped down the step behind them. A ridiculous procession charged across the open bit of road toward the wide door of the garage, dived swiftly into shelter, pulled up and shook itself.

Greasy white overalls surmounted by a blue shirt and a shock of dark red hair leaned curiously out over a half door labeled, Office Positively No Smoking. Behind him was a wall of cigarette smoke, the blare of a radio.

As Sunny started to explain, Red Head bawled into the room behind him, "Hi, Charley, come on out here! Lady wants a flat fixed."

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

"But we haven't any money," Sunny cautioned. "You'll have to trust us."

Ambling out behind the man-called-Charley was a fattish person with a scrubby beard and a brass collar button. Mournfully he shook his head.

"Nope. Sorry, lady, can't trust you. Been stung that way too often. Company's orders." And the man-called-Charley, with one glance at the sluicing rain, strongly backed him up.

"But we'll have money to-morrow morning. We'll *promise* to come back this way and pay you . . ." began Sunny anxiously.

"Of course we will," Kitt came to her support. "We're giving a marionette show in Selby at the Merrimac Hotel this evening."

"Marionette, hey? What's them?" The man-called-Charley showed some slight interest, but Brass Button continued his lugubrious head shaking.

"Nope. No trust. Y'see that there sign?" A grimy thumb indicated it to them.

"They're puppets you know. Dolls worked on strings. Look here." Kitt had an idea. "If I telephone in—we've got enough for the call—and get the hotel manager on the wire, will you take his word for us? All our marionettes are in the car and we've just *got* to get there in time to give the show to-night."

Brass Button admitted that there'd be no harm in telephoning and the man-called-Charley relented even so far as to don an oilskin and dash out into the rain for

IMPROMPTU

their car. Red Head switched off the shouting radio to which the others seemed impervious. But there matters rested. Somebody's secretary had answered the 'phone. Somebody's secretary couldn't, at the moment, reach the manager and she herself preferred the line of greatest caution.—Yes, a marionette show was expected.—No, she couldn't say the names of those who were to give it.—No, she certainly couldn't say that Kitt was the person.—Yes, she could repeat this to any one whom Miss Newcomb liked to call to the 'phone.

Brass Button took the receiver, learned only so much as Kitt had been told, and hung up doubtfully.

If, he admitted, they could prove that they had this here now show, and he sorta thought there wasn't liable to be two of 'em out on such a day, he'd be willing to gamble to the extent of fixin' a flat tire, which, after all, wasn't such an expensive sort of repair.

The car came to a thunderous halt and stood dripping water from mudguards and running board while, at a nod from Brass Button, the man-called-Charley began to jack up the right front wheel. Kitt opened the back door and dragged out a case of marionettes. She threw up the lid and took out two of the pillow slip covers. These, on opening, disclosed Joey and Barnacle Bill.

Brass Button, hands in pocket, was watching the proceeding, his own personal gamble, with interest.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

"But they ain't nothin' but *dolls*?" His tone was incredulous.

Kitt shook her head. "No. Wait." And she pulled out Joey's control. She unwound the strings so that the little clown's weighted feet touched the floor, then began to make him dance.

"*Hor—hor!*" The strange noise was a guffaw from Red Head, who also had a protest to make. "Say, you mustn't do that on this greasy floor. Wait'll I get a tarpaulin or somethin'."

Kitt caught sight of the black painted half-door to the office, and had an inspiration. Stepping behind it, she closed the lower half and nodded to Red Head. "Put the tarpaulin down in front of this, will you?" The door would effectually conceal the black strings of the marionette. Climbing to a sturdy office chair, she let the little clown drop down before the door and put him through his dance for the entranced gaze of the three garage mechanics. No juvenile audience for which she had played had ever shown more flattering attention. Then she had a better idea: the repair of the tire might take a little time, why not give them a real show for their money?

"Sunny, bring the two sailors, and, Mister, could we have lights of some kind? And a small box about the size of a shoe box? Yes, that will do."

"Run out a couple of cars, Red," ordered Brass Button. "And turn on their head lamps."

Here, then, were footlights. Here was a stage, too,

IMPROMPTU

and props, and a makeshift bridge from another office chair. Under cover of the thunderous movement of the cars, Kitt turned on the radio, even a garage radio can be tuned down if need be, and she remembered that about this hour of a Saturday morning was some sort of mountaineer program with jiggle fiddler music. Sunny appeared with Barnacle Bill and Sammy. Hastily Kitt went into conference with her.

Their audience of two, Red Head and Brass Button, had taken their place, seated on the bumpers of the cars. Over his shoulder Brass Button threw an order: "Get on with that there tire now, Charley." Charley grunted and began to loosen the bolts, but with many stageward glances in the intervals.

There was a burst of soft music behind them. Perched on their somewhat precarious bridge, the girls began the Barnacle Bill act.

The tire of the car was old and came off without effort. The tire lever dropped with a clank to the garage floor.

"Less noise there," commanded Brass Button. "Want to get throwed out?"

Charley grinned and wheeled the tire to what corresponded to a fair seat on the aisle.

"It's a hard life, Sammy . . ." Sunny spoke for Barnacle Bill. "Every time you runs aground, you has to stop and mend a puncture. 'S wet work, too." It was crude, of course, and very impromptu, but timely and got an easy laugh.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

Sammy, the red-headed puppet, it further developed in the backchat, wanted to go to sea. Barnacle Bill, wagging a dubious head, admonished from his seat on the nail box, "With a head o' hair like yours there's only one job they'd give you on board ship. And you wouldn't like that."

"What job?" Sammy demanded, and in a frantic whisper Sunny demanded of Kitt, "Is it the port or starboard light that's red?"

"Port . . . I think."

With a gesture of his puppet arms Barnacle Bill elucidated, "You'd have to hang, lashed to the ratlines all night, as a port light!" And Bill went immediately into his hornpipe.

Loud whoops of appreciation from the three-man-power audience. Brass Button slapped his knee frantically. "Hi, that's one on you, Port Light!"

The man-called-Charley joined in so heartily that Brass Button was obliged to remind him, "How 'bout that there tire you was fixin' for the lady?" At which work was recommenced.

A moment later there was an imperious summons from the office 'phone. Kitt glanced over her shoulder, but Brass Button ordered, "Don't take no notice of that, Miss. It'll only be a customer."

Having got her audience, Sunny had swung into the usual sketch, but with additional touches which gave it special appeal. Meanwhile, and in spite of his divided attention, the man-called-Charley had patched



Bill went immediately into his hornpipe.

IMPROMPTU

the tube, replaced it in the cover and, lacking any further excuse to delay in his seat on the aisle, rolled the tire back to the car.

"Better bring it to a close," whispered Kitt to Sunny.

They used the usual windup, and switched off the radio as a sign that the turn was over. Unwillingly the audience rose from their seats, but helped to pack the marionettes back in the car.

"Want any gas?" asked Brass Button. "No? Well, I guess that cleans it up. Say, where did you say this show was going to be this afternoon?"

Kitt, routing Low Jinks from where he was curled, with George as a cushion, on the driver's seat, gave him the information. "We're certainly grateful," she added, "and we'll be back to pay you as soon as we get our money."

"Needn't hurry," he said graciously, "though we're always glad to see you. . . . Hi, Charley! This is your Sat'day on, ain't it? Anyways there won't be many along, a day like this."

"What you goin' to do?" asked the suspicious Charley.

Brass Button snorted briefly. "Oh, me and Red's goin' in to town. We're goin' to see the rest of this mary-an-ette show, I can tell you!"

"Poor Charley!" murmured Kitt as they rolled out of the garage. Again en route for the Merrimac.

Chapter Fifteen

HELP FROM A STAR

CAMP, my eye!" snorted Kitt. Not even the luxurious Merrimac Hotel, where they had given an unexciting but profitable show, had been a patch on this for sheer gorgeousness. She gazed about the huge room with its rug of soft, grass green, its lovely little twin beds carved in Spanish style, its glorious, four windowed view across the mountains, its complete little green tiled bath. "Camp, indeed! This is lapping up luxury."

Sunny swung from the window. "Bet you they used furniture polish on those horses that just passed, and that some one dusts off the canoes every morning before breakfast. But then, my dear, this is a silk-lined nursery for subdebs." Sunny spoke with feeling. It would be only by luck and the success of the Kitt-Cats that she herself could hope to escape such an atmosphere.

HELP FROM A STAR

What sort of evening would this turn into? The engagement had been arranged for them, in a roundabout way through a friend of Sunny's mother, who knew some one who had a sister whose niece had come to this camp two or maybe three years ago. There had been letters back and forth, a brief contract for an evening performance accompanied by the written suggestion that they travel over such and such a route, at such and such an hour of the Thursday of this week.

Well, here they were. A maid had received them at the door, their bags had been efficiently swung off the dusty car, Low Jinks led away to kennels where, Kitt was assured, many of the young ladies kept their own pets; and their baggage, spirited ahead of them, appeared again unstrapped and all ready for unpacking on efficient little luggage stools, one at the foot of each decorative bed. But what their audience would be like, where their car, driven off by a young colored boy in trim uniform, had been taken, where they were to set up their stage, and at what hour the performance was to begin, were problems yet unsolved.

Kitt didn't like it. She preferred to work without blinders, to make her own decisions. Still it might be fun for a change.

A tap at the door. The maid again, announcing, or was it commanding?—"Miss Anstruther will see you at your convenience in the Reception Room." And waited.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

"I s'pose 'our convenience' means right now," said Kitt. "C'mon, Sunny. I need a wash up, but that can wait. Let's find out where and how and when the hired performers are to do their tricks." And she tucked her hand into Sunny's arm as they swung down the long hall behind their conductress.

There were other buildings, but all connected by long, glass enclosed pergolas, now open to climbing roses and streaming sunshine, but equipped to be closed should the slightest breeze be stirring or a few clouds threaten the sun. Kitt snorted "Camp!" again, under her breath, but made no further comment.

Miss Anstruther was little older than Sunny. She rose as they came in and, after a moment's awkward pause, said, "Yes?" politely, with a rising inflection.

Kitt felt a wicked desire to pull her errant forelock, and, curtsying, mumble, "Please, Miss, the Puppeteers." But demurely she introduced Sunny and herself. "Miss Fairweather. And I'm Kitt Newcomb. Of the marionettes, you know."

"Oh—ah! Now what is it you call yourselves? The Kitt-Cats. Yes, of course. Well, I had thought you would want to know where you were to go, and the hour of the performance." The tone was distinctly patronizing.

A faint twinkle of amusement began to show in Sunny's eyes. "By the way," she interrupted in gentle reproof, "I don't think I quite got your name. . . ."

HELP FROM A STAR

This produced "Elizabeth Anstruther," and a slight confusion on the part of Miss Anstruther, as well as the offer of chairs. The interview began to move more smoothly.

The marionettes, it seemed, were to be a sort of ice breaker to the dance immediately following the performance. Exact time limits were imposed.

"The stage must be completely cleared for the orchestra by nine forty-five. The dance begins at ten."

Sunny took all this with placidity and still with her amused little twinkle. But Kitt's professional instincts were indignant. You could hardly explain to this haughty young person just how one felt about the Kitt-Cats; that they were too good to be just a prelude to anything at all; or even what a task it was to dismantle the show and pack away each separate puppet just as it would be needed for the next performance. Kitt's chin went up.

Sunny voiced a mild expostulation. "That's going to cut our performance to an hour and a half. I'm afraid . . ."

Miss Anstruther rose. "I'm afraid that will be necessary. The dance, you see, is in honor of Clement Hyde. We have his daughter here in the camp, and this is her birthday. He has asked that the dance be an early one, as he is leaving early in the morning." Her voice dropped significantly. . . . "For Hollywood."

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

One gathered that the interview was over, the audience dismissed. But Miss Anstruther turned in the doorway to add graciously, "You might perhaps like to come to the dance, yourselves."

"No, thank you." Kitt's refusal was firm. "We have another performance to-morrow."

Back in their room she asked, "Who the heck is this Hyde person, darling?"

Sunny was laughing. "Sooch ignorance! He's Hollywood's gift to a waiting world, my dear. But I think that he was once a really good actor. He can't be at all young if he's got a daughter here. Don't tell me you've never seen him."

"Mmm . . ." Kitt was noncommittal. "Why high-hat *us*, and then give a dance specially for this California Don Juan? We're all doing the same job, entertaining folks." Kitt, who never did things by halves, was now professional to her backbone and finger tips. "But he sounds poisonous to me, I wouldn't go to their old dance if they doubled the check. Only I hate to be treated as if I'd never owned an evening dress or put on high heels. Servants' entrance sort of thing." Suddenly she broke off, thought hard for a moment and produced the astounding suggestion, "Sunny! Let's scam out of this place. I hate it."

At Sunny's gasp of surprise Kitt pulled herself up, and blew back the lock over her forehead. "No-o. I don't suppose we could . . . could we? Oh, well, let's get it over with."

HELP FROM A STAR

Kitt had professed indifference to the famous Clement Hyde, but an actor was an actor, and third cousin at least to their own profession. If it was *the* Clement Hyde, why there was little, outside his private life, not known about him. One hadn't heard before that he had a daughter. One had heard of him as a romantic young star of the stage long before the talkie days. Not handsome, but distinguished looking. Very thin, very tall, with an unusual bang of now graying hair and long, eloquent hands, he was nowadays generally cast for character parts, Sherlock Holmes, gypsy chiefs, Hamlet, rather than the younger heroes of the screen.

All during dinner the dining room was abuzz with his name. Stories, incidents which Kitt could swear had been told a hundred times as referring to the Barrymores, to Clark Gable or Leslie Howard, were to-night attributed to the guest of honor. And desiring the sugar, she heard herself asking to have the Clement Hyde passed, if you please!

Sunny seemed less impressed by her surroundings; less impressed, too, by Clement Hyde. "Good heavens, Kitt, what does the man matter? Except that we've got to do a really polished, perfect show to-night."

That was another thought and rather shaking; disturbing also to Kitt's equanimity was the bland assumption of superiority on the part of every one here. Sunny, of course, was better equipped to combat it, just as she had done with Miss Anstruther. During dinner she managed to arouse the greenest of green-eyed envy by

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

her gentle emphasis on the Kitt-Cats' exciting independence, and her kindly sympathy for those less favored ones who were sent from home to summer camps and back to school again, with just no opportunity at all for the thrilling, gypsy life of puppeteers along the road. She didn't say this, she merely implied it all, which made it far more effective. Yes, Sunny was good at that sort of thing.

Kitt wasn't. She faced the evening's performance irritated and at odds with her audience, and frankly anxious over the possible opinion of the great Clement Hyde concerning marionettes in general, the Kitt-Cats in particular. She tried to laugh it off. Pooh, that man! She tried to think. "What does it matter? He's just one of a hundred. Maybe he isn't even out there after all." But strings tried to entangle themselves, controls worked stiffly; she dropped two puppets as she hung them into place, though not, thank goodness, on the stage.

Sunny with irritating proficiency swung immediately into a smooth performance. And when Kitt was busy on the bridge with one of her solo parts, she even found time to pack away such props and puppets as would not be needed again.

But was Clement Hyde only one of the audience? He was the whole audience. Applause waited for the signal of his approving hands, and the curtain hadn't been up five minutes before Kitt was acutely conscious of exactly where this guest of honor was seated, on

HELP FROM A STAR

the center aisle. Heads turned toward that place almost as often and as consistently as toward the stage; curious, adoring, fascinated eyes followed every movement of the tall gaunt figure in the correct evening dress. Nobody, with such rival interest on the other side of the footlights, could possibly give fair attention to the stage.

When the second act, Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, was completed, Kitt waited as usual for the burst of applause that always followed, waited in the chilling silence, puppets in hand, for Sunny to swing open the curtains again that the marionettes might take their customary curtain call. But nothing happened. Second after second seemed like minutes, like hours, as she waited, her heart in her mouth and a control in either hand. What *could* have happened out there?

Sunny bent down to peer through the peep-hole in the curtain. She straightened up, grinned cheerfully. "S' all right," she began.

Then it came. Such a heart warming burst as Kitt had seldom heard. The curtains swung open. Red Riding Hood and the Wolf bowed, and bowed again.

"But what on earth?" Kitt asked, as the actors returned from their fifth encore.

"Oh, our audience dropped his program and took a minute or two to find it. Nobody clapped till they saw what he was going to do next," reported the amused Sunny. "Barnacle Bill now?"

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

Kitt nodded, dumb with fury.

And so it continued. Clement Hyde's laugh led all the others, his long slim hands were the first to begin the applause, enthusiastic, generous applause. But Kitt felt she hated him, resenting him with an impotent, baffled dislike that grew with the finish of every act. Clement Hyde was stealing the show. Why did the rest of the audience bother to face themselves toward the stage at all? Why didn't they just turn their seats to face their hero? Then they might drop their programs when he dropped his, shuffle whichever foot he happened to shuffle, sneeze or cough or blink as though they were attached by little strings to this screen idol of theirs. What if he did applaud the marionettes? Kitt told herself she wasn't one least bit grateful. She would have been glad to sacrifice every last ounce of his approval just to have the crowd act naturally, applaud of their own accord and to be able to feel that they were sincere about it.

Well, that was over. She slammed the final puppet into his rack, turned away from the final curtain.

"How quick can we pack, do you think, and get out of here?" she demanded.

Beyond the curtain there was the usual shuffle of pushed back chairs, the usual shuffle of feet, chorus of voices and laughter. But to-night, with the dance so soon to begin, nobody would want to see the pup-

HELP FROM A STAR

pets work offstage, nobody would be up beside the curtain to watch Sunny pull the strings.

"Not long." Sunny gathered a bundle of marionettes over her arm. "I think we can put the trunks in that little side dressing room, don't you? And get these curtains down and the stage dismantled in about fifteen minutes. Then we'll be out of the way of the orchestra and can take our time to pack the rest of the stuff."

"Got to have some one help to pull down the rods," said Kitt. "How about that colored man that set 'em up for us? I ought to have told him to come back." She shoved the second sample case into the dressing room. "If you'll be folding curtains and back drops I'll go look for him," she said, and started.

Sunny's lifted voice behind her, "Hey, Kitten! Take off that awful smock."

Kitt's chin tilted angrily. Indeed it wasn't a pretty smock; it had been a long time since it was even clean. But for the moment it was Kitt's flag of rebellion and signified the contempt of the worker for such drones and butterflies as flitted about, out front.

She skirted the dance floor where, in little clumps of three and fours and half dozens, people stood about, waiting. Through a farther door dribbled a small parade of black-coated musicians with instruments under their arms. Kitt couldn't resist a swift glance about her, but the famous Mr. Clement Hyde was nowhere in sight.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

The man she wanted to have help with the curtain rods was squeezing through a door with three orchestra chairs when Kitt caught him, cut him out and led him victoriously back to the stage.

"Take this down for you and put it back in the case? Sure, Miss."

Kitt turned away and opened the door of the little room.

For an instant she thought a party was going on. The room seemed so full of people. Then she saw there were really only three. Sunny, kneeling on the floor before an open sample case, had dropped her work to watch. The pretty girl with the cloud of fluffy fair hair, seated cross-legged on a table, had the puppet bear in her hands and had just paused in working the control to glance up as Kitt came in, but not, however at Kitt.

Braced against a chair back was a man in evening dress, without his coat. He was thin, almost cadaverous, tall and distinguished with tired yet humorous eyes and sleek, iron-gray hair brushed down curiously over his forehead. At his feet Joey the clown was making tiny, pathetic gestures. Kitt closed the door softly behind her and, leaning against the wall, watched in silence.

"Space and Eternity. Time immeasurable. Extent without a bound . . . !" The voice was soft and deep and tender, so that without quite knowing why, there were tears in one's eyes and a clutch at one's throat.



At his feet Joey the clown was making tiny pathetic gestures.

HELP FROM A STAR

How ridiculous! It was only the familiar Joey, cotton and Japanese *crêpe* and *papier mâché*, lamenting, in the words of Gene O'Brian's great tragedy and the voice of this shirt-sleeved stranger the death of his bride and the emptiness of life.

Then the stranger handed the clown to Sunny and said in a pleasantly warm, everyday voice. "Thank you, Miss Fairweather. I just wanted to see if my old hands could still work the control." And seeing Kitt, he added, "And I must thank you, Miss Newcomb, for a particularly delightful performance."

Good gracious, this was Clement Hyde himself! Why, he was delightful, charming, incredible. And more than a bit of a genius. Everything that had been written or said about him was true. And he had come backstage just to speak with them, Sunny and Kitt, and to say thank you for the good time they . . . *they*, mind you! had given him. Kitt felt humbled and a little frightened and would have been completely tongue-tied if the man hadn't been so pleasant, so much at ease even without his coat, which he must have removed in order to work the control more easily.

"This is my Clementina." He nodded toward the girl.

Clementina Hyde looked up from the bear with a little frown of concentration, grinned across at Kitt and went back to wagging the bear's head. "I'll never be able to do it as you do, Daddy. But then my early education wasn't as good as yours, I'm afraid."

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

Mr. Hyde shook his head at her. "I started with a tenth-rate English road show when I was hardly higher than a cricket, a shabby pierrot show with marionettes between the acts. And that was nearly forty years ago. For two years the puppets were my best, almost my only, friends. So I couldn't resist coming here tonight when I heard they were going to have marionettes."

So he'd come all the way from wherever he was, not to visit the camp, but to see them, the Kitt-Cats. Kitt thought of Miss Anstruther and chuckled inwardly. So much for *her* airs!

Beyond the closed door the sounds that had been instruments tuning up swung into a toe-tingling fox trot. Sunny went swiftly on with her packing and Kitt bent to lend a hand.

"You're going to this dance, both of you?" asked Clement Hyde.

Kitt shook her head.

"But you are," he persisted. "Of course."

"Oh, we were invited all right." Sunny looked up. "And we've each got an evening dress in our bags."

"Then, there's no excuse, once we get these things out of the way. Look here, I can pack puppets with my eyes blindfolded." And he began to demonstrate it. "You just tell me where each ones goes. Then you must rush into those pretty dresses. Who's that at the door?"

HELP FROM A STAR

There was a burst of louder music as the man stuck in his head. "Stage is packed, Miss. That all?"

Kitt said it was all, and that she'd find him later, thank you. The music dimmed again. Clement Hyde was talking as he worked, telling stories, while his swift long fingers deftly packed, of his early days on the road; of one-night stands through the hot South and the bleak Middle West in midwinter; of California towns where they played in barns, real barn-storming days, those were. Kitt's packing grew slower and slower till he laughed and stopped.

"But you'll never get to the dance if you encourage me to go on yarning like this."

Another knock at the door. It was Miss Anstruther this time.

"Oh, Mr. Hyde, and Clementina! Here you are. I've been looking all over . . ." Her glance changed from slight disapproval at the company he had chosen, to positive dismay over her idol's unconventional display of shirt sleeves.

Kitt could have giggled at her expression. So shocked—so cross.

"You can't keep theater people from getting together," declared Mr. Hyde, brushing the dust off his knees and unconcernedly slipping into his coat. "Is that the last of the packing? Well then, suppose you run off and get ready for that waltz you're keeping for me, Miss Fairweather. And Miss Newcomb

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

has promised me the first fox trot after she's on the floor."

"But the committee, that is, the entertainment committee thought . . . that is, they have partners chosen for you," began Miss Anstruther worriedly.

Mr. Hyde's tactful little gesture brushed the committee out of his way. "I'd be delighted. But the committee must know plenty of young men. They can bring them up and introduce them to my professional friends here." His gesture widened to include Kitt and Sunny.

Miss Anstruther's exit registered dignified disapprobation. So now she'd added Clement Hyde to her disapproval list which had already contained the Kitt-Cats. Mr. Hyde, her well-stiffened back seemed to say, had a strange choice of friends. Kitt caught the amusement in Sunny's eyes and barely repressed a giggle.

The evening was a vast success and it was after midnight when they crawled into the decorative little beds. But such an evening! With the honor guest to smooth the way, always on the watch to see that they met the right young men, that they had the best partners in the room, and were not without the conspicuous attentions of Clement Hyde himself . . . who wouldn't have felt it the most thrilling experience of one's summer? Kitt shuddered to think how close she had come to walking out on all this. But it was

HELP FROM A STAR

Kitt, next morning, who was so unkind as to suggest to Sunny:

"If it hadn't been for Clement Hyde, do you think we would have received this?"

"This" was a formal little note which had arrived with their dainty breakfast tray. It expressed the camp's pleasure at the visit of the Kitt-Cats and concluded, "We should be so pleased if you would set a date for a return engagement, later in the summer. We suggest the twenty-eighth of August."

"The twenty-eighth?" Sunny looked up with a frown of concentration. "Wh-y-y. I'm afraid that's taken. It's the . . ."

"Hurray!" cheered Kitt unexpectedly. "I'd just hate to have to prevaricate to 'em." College fund or not, she was glad they wouldn't return here this season. But it looked like a good prospect for next year.

Even more unexpected was what happened at their departure, an hour later.

Sunny, still in low gear, had to pull out for a gorgeous limousine sailing up the wide driveway. Just to her left was one of the pergolas leading from the open door of another building, and at that same moment a man carrying a large suitcase dashed out of the entrance waving at a car. At their car? Yes, he was!

Sunny braked and waited. Here came the famous Clement Hyde, complete with hand luggage and an air of mystery. Cautioning silence with an upraised

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

hand, throwing over his shoulder an amusing glance of mock apprehension, he thrust his bag into the car beside the astonished Low Jinks and slithered his long leanness in next to Kitt. The car gathered speed.

A face, two, three, a whole crowd of surprised and bewildered countenances, lined the long pergola; Clementina Hyde's, more twinkly than astonished, was among them.

"D'you mind?" asked the famous Clement Hyde. "Troupin', you know . . . so much more fun than all that sort of thing." With a backward glance he raised his hat as the car slipped out of the drive into the open road. "*Pfff*," he breathed a long sigh of relief. "Glad that's over!"

Kitt would have been surprised to know how much her expression reflected his.

Chapter Sixteen

THE FAIR

For a pencil Sunny?" Kitt gazed upward at that satisfying consultation list above the windscreen. It was always fun to cross off the filled engagements, the final touch of accomplishment. A pencil, joggling to the movement of the car, reached up and marked out, "Hotel Merrimac, Cedarbrook Camp Number Three," and the "High Trees Lodge." They had just come from there. She'd have to wait till the car stopped to put in two new dates for the future. There was another hotel, the St. George, a nibble which had followed one of the advertising cards. Kitt thought she could land that with the help of some photographs and a personal letter telling where they had played. Another was a summer school on Lake Champlain, for librarians. She was pretty sure of that and it would be a good build-up for the future.

"Oh, looky! A Punch and Judy show!" Sunny's

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

sudden foot on the brake almost rammed Kitt's nose against the windscreen. Straightening herself and her hat Kitt sat up to look.

A long streamer, green and red on a gay orange ground stretched from side to side of the village street. In letters two feet high it modestly announced that Barrington County's Famous Fair was now on, August the seventeenth to the twenty-seventh, inclusive. Various smaller and less violent proclamations pointed the way. But it was one of these that Kitt was regarding, a mere whisper of a sign, telling you that Pettijohn's Punch and Judy gave a performance at three on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

"To-day is Wednesday," Kitt reminded Sunny.

Sunny grinned. "Okay by me. We may pick up a few ideas. And the fair should be kind of fun, too."

Following the pointers, the big car swung up a bumpy cinder side street to one corner of the village. Here, in a huge lot that bordered on woods and country, again were tents and more tents, hot dog and doughnut stands, barbecue counters, a pleasant smell of horses, the sound of sheep and cattle, booths displaying everything from cakes and jams and jellies to farm produce, crochet work and patchwork quilts. And a tiny stall for the Punch and Judy.

Around at the back Kitt found an open space where cars were parked; she hopped out, locked the door and invited Low Jinks to come along. The two girls elbowed their way, past barkers and horse traders,

THE FAIR

paused by an auction sale of Japanese "art." . . . You needed at least four pairs of eyes here to get even a general impression of the varied busy stalls, the moving, changing crowd. . . .

"Where did we see that Punch and Judy?"

"When do we eat?" The questions overlapped.

"There's plenty of places to eat, but let's get one we can sit down in. I could eat a long, long time. S'pose we ask the girl at the Punch and Judy.—Two tickets, please. And where can we find . . ."

She was a pretty girl, with big worried gray eyes and frizzy light brown hair beneath her wide straw hat. The tickets were a quarter each, and the show would be given right here, at three o'clock. The best place to eat was Ye Waffle Shoppe, down there beyond the doughnut stand. And would you tell them that Helen Pettijohn sent you, please?

The Shoppe was bright and clean, smelling of good coffee and bacon, and nearly deserted at this late hour. Kitt duplicated Sunny's order, asked for a saucer of water for Jinks and, resting her elbows on the table, yawned and glanced out at the sky. "You may have to take over from here, Sunny. Looks as though it were getting ready to pour and I can't hold the car to a wet road. I wonder," she added idly, "what they do with the Punch and Judy show when it rains."

"Fold up and flit, I guess. I've never seen one; have you? Must be quite different to handle from the marionettes."

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

The sky had darkened rapidly, and they were finishing their second helping of waffles by electric light when the door flew open and Helen Pettijohn of the gray eyes crossed to the telephone booth in the corner. They heard her nickel clink into the slot, heard her give a number crisply, couldn't help eavesdropping on what followed.

"That you, Sam? Listen, dear, it's going to pour here. . . . Well, I can't help that, it's going to here all right. . . . Yes, he said I could have it for fifteen dollars and a share of the receipts, but he wants the fifteen in advance. . . . But I haven't got it, I tell you. . . . Well, can't you hurry, because I'll have to change the signs about the grounds and all, and it's only forty-five minutes before we open the show. . . ."

She hung up and smiled vaguely at the girls as she passed the table. "Lunch good?" she asked, but one could see that she hardly heard their answer. The door closed behind her.

"Rotten luck, this rain," said Kitt, full of sympathy for a fellow professional. "Suppose we wait here for a while, shall we, till the worst is over?"

For a few moments they considered letting the Punch and Judy get along without their attendance, to race the storm home. Merida was only ten or twelve miles away, Liskeard fifteen beyond that. . . .

"Oh, we've done a good two days' work. They won't be expecting us back before dinner," was Sunny's lazy suggestion. "We owe ourselves a little

THE FAIR

fun." So they sat on, watching the clouds hurl up behind tent tops, frantic shopkeepers rush to cover all before the oncoming storm, farmers scurry to shelter their stock, a group of boy scouts, herded by a scoutmaster, struggle to bring forth slickers from bulging knapsacks.

"Ginty McKee," murmured Kitt, sucking on a lump of sugar from the bowl before her.

"Who? Oh, yes, the scoutmaster. So it is. I didn't know he . . . But what about our getting back to the car before we get marooned here, we forgot to pack a boat . . ." began Sunny when the Pettijohn girl hurried in again. This time she wore a raincoat and an expression still more worried than before. She was almost running as she passed them on her way to the 'phone booth, and her voice was sharp with anxiety.

"That you, Mother? . . . Sam started? . . . Well, Mother, he'll be *too late* . . . Oh, *gosh*, what'll I do now? . . . I *can't* get that tent without the money, and I've got only seven dollars here . . . Oh, *all right*, but that's *too late*, I tell you . . ."

Kitt's eyes met Sunny's across the little table. They seemed to come to an agreement about something, for, when Kitt spoke to the Punch and Judy girl a moment later, her partner raised no objection.

"Can't we lend you the money you need?" was what she asked.

The girl, rushing by, stopped—almost with her mouth open.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

"Wha . . . at?" she asked, stupidly, then sank into the chair that Sunny pushed toward her. "Lend me the mo . . ." she began.

"We couldn't help overhearing," explained Sunny. "Not having anything to listen to but each other, and we listen to each other all day long," she continued, brightly insulting. "We've had two pretty successful days, so we thought we might help you out. At least until your . . ."

"Brother. Sam," interjected the girl.

"Till your brother shows up."

"Go on," begged the girl, relaxing into her chair, "you interest me strangely. But what's it mean to you?"

"Oh, we bought tickets for your show," explained Kitt, and giggled. "No, but honestly—we have a marionette show ourselves. And we'd neither of us ever seen a Punch and Judy, so we stopped off here just for that."

"Come along then and talk to the man with the tent. But he means business. And this is my first day to give the show, so it's business to me, too." Helen was hurrying them out of Ye Waffle Shoppe, along the lane of flapping, bustling booth keepers, talking as she ran, shouting above the wind and the rush. "It's Dad's Punch and Judy, one he brought over from England years ago. It's a good one, too. Sam was coming on at three o'clock to help me work it. But the seats were all outdoors and we can't give it there, in the rain.

THE FAIR

And we'd sold so many tickets I really do think we could fill the tent. . . . Here we are, Mr. Dart."

Mr. Dart grunted. A short, fattish man in rusty brown town clothes, a perpetual chewed cigar and a scowl, he was tacking up a sign in front of his patched and weather-stained tent. The sign displayed information regarding Maestro Cassidy, World's Greatest Conjuror.

Miss Pettijohn began to explain that she now had the money for the tent. Should she bring along her placard? And could he send some one to help her move the little stage, please, because it was too heavy for her alone.

Mr. Dart, with not even a polite interest, continued to nail up his sign.

Kitt took out the money from her purse. "Get a receipt," she whispered to the girl. "And have him put his agreement in writing, whatever it was." She didn't like that little man. Fat men should be cheerful, not grouchy.

"We ought to get the placards up soon," insisted Helen to the apparently deaf Mr. Dart. "As long as possible before the show. But if you haven't got any one to help with the stage, my brother will be along presently."

"Needn't bother." Around his cigar, Mr. Dart broke his vow of silence. "Won't need your sign." His hammer indicated the one he had just completed tacking in place. "Got me a tenant for the tent while you

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

was hesitatin'. Pays more'n you could. Thought I'd better." And settling the battered derby on his grizzled head, he opened the tent flap and slid within. The girls were left standing before the blank tent wall.

"But . . . but he *promised*," began the Pettijohn girl feebly.

"Promised nothin'." The head reappeared through the opening. "There . . .," he jerked a thumb toward the sign, "Maestro Cassidy,—payin' me twenty. And shares o' course. Like to raise him?" His glance, hopeful, lingered on Kitt and Sunny.

Kitt whirled on her heel. "I should say *not*," she declared firmly. "Come on, girls, there're lots of other tents in this fair."

"H'ain't none." The disembodied voice, blown by the wind, followed them as they scuttled away.

"And now what?" was Sunny's demand.

A scurry of raindrops as big as silver dollars sent them huddling to the temporary shelter of a booth side. There they paused to take counsel.

"I'm afraid he's right," said the brown-haired girl, almost in tears. "Oh, dear, we did so much want to give this! We do need the money. And I've taken in seven dollars in tickets; and lots of others said they'd come back and buy. . . . Good gracious!" She paused, startled out of her wail. "What on earth's the matter with your friend?"

For Kitt, screeching like a banshee, to be heard even above the flapping of canvas, the rush of wind, had

THE FAIR

made a dive half the length of the fairgrounds. "Peter! Hey, there, *Peter!*"

The boy who turned at her summons had a head of red hair of no retiring hue, a flaunting banner of carrotty locks, the face beneath it wreathed in a wide smile of welcome.

"Well, well, if it isn't half my little mascots!" he heralded Kitt, whose reply was inaudible at this distance. But she had buttonholed him, was bringing him back in triumph.

"Look what I found! French—Pettijohn," she mumbled hurriedly, in haste to be on more important affairs. "Listen, Peter, we're in a hole." And she tore into her story, stating the case of Helen as though it had been hers and Sunny's own, of which fact by this time she was quite convinced. Ten minutes, and the Punch and Judy had become one of the Kitt-Cat Marionette Company. "You're a bright lad; any ideas?" she ended breathlessly, with flushed cheeks.

Peter nodded briefly. "Sure. If we can get it fixed in time. Let's see, now. . . ." His glance roved the grounds. "Where would Uncle Kermit be at this hour?" He glanced at his wrist watch. "Twenty-five to three. Probably down by the cattle show." And herding them along through gusts of wind and slight spatters of the hesitating storm, he explained, "He's a real uncle, and he rents half these grounds to the fair every year. That's how I happen to be here, sort

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

of an overseer job. He'll be sure to have a solution, if we can find him."

"It's all in knowing the right people," murmured Kitt complacently, pausing to pick up Low Jinks and tuck him beneath her arm.

Uncle Kermit was quite easy to find. He towered, big and brown and dependable looking, one of a group around an enormous white pig which had just been awarded a blue ribbon and which looked as though he were a drawing out of a child's story book, all done with one circle of the pencil, or like an honored ancestor of the celluloid three little pigs.

Approached by Peter with the tale of the iniquities of one tent owner, named Dart, Uncle Kermit shook his head . . . "That Hamus Dart!" he grumbled, as though he knew him of old. "A place for your Punch and Judy? . . . Let—me—see." And Kitt had a pleasant feeling that now everything was going to be all right.

And it was! Uncle Kermit had a huge dairy barn not yet finished, but with electric lights installed. The upper part to be used for hay, for the separators and farm machinery and, entered directly from the road, would exactly fit their needs. There were a few workman's trestles there; perhaps a platform could be made of these, with boards laid across; there was a whole stack of planking— "But at three o'clock . . ." he glanced dubiously at his watch.

"We shan't need a platform for the Punch and

THE FAIR

Judy," Kitt pointed out. "Just some one to carry it over there for us. And before the rain really starts."

"Good." Nodding briskly, he waved them away with an absent gesture, his mind already back on points and breeds and whatever it is that dairy farmers think of. "Show them where it is, Peter." He trailed away.

The barn proved to be perfect. Spacious and spotless, on the edge of the fairground, with a whole battery of bright lights to flash on as the sky darkened and darkened.

"Peter, you're a darling," declared Sunny, gazing about the huge empty room as she struggled to replace half a dozen slipping hairpins. "But he didn't say anything about what price he'd charge us to rent all this magnificence."

"Rent it? He's giving it. Though if you have a good audience I'd donate something, say, to the Dogs' Hospital. That's his favorite charity."

"Please," Helen meekly put forth a claim, "I know you're handling this beautifully. But how are we going to let people know that the show is here? I mean . . ."

Yes, they saw. And nobody had a suggestion till Kitt let out, like another explosion, her own idea:

"Ginty!"

What on earth was a Ginty? begged Miss Pettijohn's expressive gray eyes.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

Ginty was a boy scout leader. He and his little darlings had, Kitty explained, been seen diving into slickers some twenty minutes ago, out in front of Ye Waffle Shoppe. Ginty should be informed, his aid commandeered, and boy scouts should herald the glad tidings to every corner, nook and cranny of the fairgrounds. "Oyez, oyez, oyez! Let it be known that a Punch and Judy show, of extreme and superior excellence will, this afternoon, rain or shine and preferably the former, be shown in the new dairy barn of and so on and so on . . ." Kitt reeled it off at random. "And them as won't come to see the Punch will come to get an eyeful of Uncle Kermit's new barn, or I'm no farmer's lass."

She was no farmer's lass, but she was right. Ginty's scouts, bored with pork and beef on the hoof, pounced with shouts of glee on this unexpected opportunity to loosen and demonstrate their lung capacity. Within ten minutes of Kitt's bright idea, the fairgrounds began to echo to sounds as of hog callers in full cry. And so successful were they that Peter and Sunny, scurrying across the grounds with the Punch and Judy box between them, Helen following close with props, began to run into a swarm of people, all hurtling toward the barn, pouring in as though the threatening thunder and flashes of lightning behind them were herding them forward.

Swirling in before the wind, Jinks at her heels, both

THE FAIR

raincoats over her arm, Kitt found Helen gazing about her and, astonishingly, almost in tears.

"But this place is *huge!*" she wailed. "Your Ginty Whatsisname said he'd take tickets at the door and he's sold nineteen dollars and fifty cents worth already and we can't ever hope to make all these people hear a Punch and Judy show in such a big place." All without pause for breath.

Kitt gaped in consternation. The girl was right, Punch was for a small audience. Accustomed to the full-sized houses for the marionettes, that hadn't occurred to her.

Peter, close behind her, had a solution. Blandly he proffered it. "But you've got the marionettes here, haven't you? Why not bring those in, instead?"

He hadn't, of course, heard the beginning of this Helen-Sunny-Kitt combination; didn't know that the girls had offered only their financial support. Of course they couldn't do that—start to help Miss Pettijohn with her show, then steal it out from under her, like that!

Chapter Seventeen

PUNCH AND JUDY

MARIONETTES? Oh, yes, you told me that you had a puppet show," said Helen Pettijohn. "Are they here in your car? Well, that seems a grand idea. And would you let me work one, maybe? I've made them myself . . ."

"But, wait, wait. We can't possibly get them ready in time. . . ."

"Why not?" was Sunny's suggestion. "Let the audience see us set up the stage. Kitt can make an announcement about it. Most people love to see anything behind the scenes, and anyway it's pouring so now that nobody can hear the marionettes until the storm clears a little. They'll be glad of something to look at."

"And of something to do," suggested Helen. "How about telling the first comers to rig themselves seats with the planks and trestles? Then those at the back will see better."

"Smart gal!" Kitt reached up to pat the crown of

PUNCH AND JUDY

Helen's hat. "It's five past three now. I'd better tell 'em what to expect."

The audience, glad to be out of the rain, applauded warmly. Eagerly, with rustling of damp slickers, the scuff of feet on the new boards, they craned and exclaimed, absorbing every last detail of the stage arrangements; the putting together of the metal rods that formed the little platform and proscenium; the placing of sample cases which, later, formed the bridge along which the puppeteers moved, the unrolling of curtains; the hanging of marionettes in place in the wings to await their cues. As the girls worked, Kitt and Sunny kept up a running comment of explanation, directed Peter and Helen, both new at this game, to hang curtains, connect light plugs, switch on the phonograph, select records. It was useful business, especially as much of their action needed no explanation to the audience. During part of the unpacking, the storm roared so loudly overhead and beat so heavily on the slates that the girls could scarcely hear each other's voices; the marionettes would have been drowned in the tumult.

Ginty McGee had just appeared with the surprising sum of forty-five dollars and seventy-five cents, taken in at the improvised box office, and Kitt, feeling the usual warm glow of happiness at the first faint applause, the stir of excitement as she switched on the footlight, turned quickly. Over her shoulder sounded a voice, unpleasantly familiar.

In the door at the back was the tent owner, bran-

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

dishing a half open umbrella, rain dripping from battered hat brim and wilting mustache.

"If ye go on, ye'll be sorry. I'm warnin' ye . . ." he repeated. "Ye ain't got no right . . ."

There was a rattle of rings as Sunny swung open the curtain. Peter uttered a violent "*Sh . . . shush!*" And every particle of Kitt's attention was instantly claimed by the marionettes in her hand.

Always afterward she felt that this performance was one of their very best. Perhaps it was the heightened effect of drama caused by the impromptu rush with which they had assembled it, perhaps it was the passing storm outside and the almost cozy dryness in the huge, strange theater, or maybe because they were playing, she and Sunny, almost as much for their audience behind the scenes as for the people out front, for the Kitt-Cat marionettes were new to both Peter and Helen. But the Pettijohn girl knew puppets; she was already accustomed to the type of control, and she could be trusted on the bridge to hold a marionette in place so long as it had no motions to make beyond the little gestures of aliveness and listening. This gave both Kitt and Sunny a brief breathing space at odd moments to continue with unpacking and hanging the puppets for the last three scenes, as Helen took over from first one, then the other.

"She'll make a puppeteer," Kitt murmured in passing.

Sunny nodded, a little absent frown between her

PUNCH AND JUDY

brows. "What do you suppose that . . . that man meant? Saying we'd be sorry?" she whispered anxiously.

Kitt didn't know. It was threatening and unpleasant. Still, she didn't see what he could do. Later, while the curtains were closed between scenes and she was putting a record on the machine, she asked Peter, "Could he make trouble for us, do you think?"

"Who? Dart? Don't imagine he'll try any rough stuff. He'd be too afraid of Uncle Kermit here. Just being disagreeable, I guess." But he glanced toward the door through which the unpleasant little man had gone and when Kitt looked round a moment later, Peter, too, had vanished. Probably gone after him. She felt vaguely relieved.

The show unwound its usual swift course. The Clown announcer, the Bear juggler, G. Washington and Betsy Ross, Sojo, the Persian dancer, Barnacle Bill and Sammy; and Kitt had just raised the curtain on Red Riding Hood when again she heard Dart's voice. She was conscious that he had some one with him, but she could not listen to him and keep in mind all the intricacy of stage business. Helen was answering him, then in a moment Sunny, as she was released from the bridge.

". . . thirty-five dollars," he declared. "The other ten ye can keep."

Thirty-five dollars? But that was only ten less than

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

the box office receipts. Why, he must have overheard Ginty's report on that sum!

A moment later, with the scene ended, Kitt stepped down. "What's the matter?" she asked in an angry whisper. "You really must keep quiet back here. Your voices can be heard out front."

Dart's friend was a smooth, dark little man in a suit the hue of overdone gingerbread. His small black eyes, like twin raisins, were too close to a large blob of a nose that might have melted when he was popped into the oven. Some kind of lawyer, Kitt gathered.

". . . otherwise my client," he was saying, "will feel that it is his duty to lay information against you for violating the rules that govern the fair. That would mean a fine of a hundred dollars. . . ."

"Apiece," interjected Dart with irritating relish.

"Boloney!" snorted Sunny, brushing him aside. Kitt could have giggled if she hadn't been so worried. With just such high-handed unconcern, though in more elegant language, did Sunny's mother dismiss some petty household annoyance. "Go on, Kitt. We can't keep the audience waiting. Where's the wolf?"

"Boloney? Young lady, you'll soon find out . . ."

Kitt heard the lawyer begin as she took her place, ready for the curtain to open.

". . . No license," Dart was continuing.

"But they have. That is, we . . . we're only giving this as part of the Punch and Judy show." Poor Helen. Well, it *was* hard on her, because she lived here; this

PUNCH AND JUDY

was her job and she had to go on with it to-morrow and the next day and the day after that. Kitt brought Red Riding Hood to the cottage door, swung back the curtains again while Sunny whisked on the interior back drop of the cottage scene.

"Yer license," Dart was shaking a soiled finger under Helen's nose, "calls for an open air performance. A man kin leave his tent door open and call it open air." He glanced overhead at the rafters. "But ye can't call *this* open air. He . . . he!"

"Less noise, please!" warned Sunny, haughtily, over her shoulder. The voices dropped to a lower pitch.

At that he was probably right, thought Kitt with a flutter of panic. She had seen enough of theaters and entertainment halls by now to know that a permit to give entertainment for money needs the endorsement of both fire and sanitary departments.

"So . . . thirty-five dollars," reiterated the persistent Mr. Dart.

". . . the better to *eat* you with, my dear!" snarled Kitt's marionette wolf.

The play finished with a flourish, Wicked Wolf was caught in his own trap, Red Riding Hood and her Grandmother happily reunited.

Kitt swung round on the bridge. "Where does this hold-up stuff come in?" she demanded angrily.

"Now, now," the lawyer's voice was unctuously conciliatory. "My client will be satisfied with justice. You

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

may pay your bills here, but we must insist that you make no profit. His own entertainer, Cassidy, will have to be compensated for the customers you've tempted away." Well, it was nice to think the marionettes had spoiled their tent show. "And the remainder, of course," with a glance toward Dart, "he will award to a worthy charity."

"Sure, sure," approved the client hurriedly. It was pretty obvious who would receive the charity.

Sunny was busy out front, displaying the puppets. Helen had collapsed, speechless and noncombative on a packing case. If only Peter would come back! If only Ginty . . . no, no, that wouldn't do, for Ginty had the cash with him. Oh, dear, *what* did one do now?

Hurray, here was somebody! Kitt could have hugged Peter's carroty topknot and freckled face. Behind him loomed the dependable broad shoulders of Uncle Kermit. He seemed to have an idea of the situation.

"These friends of yours, Miss?" he asked. Kitt's denial was definite and vigorous.

"Then," Uncle Kermit turned on the two intruders, "what you doing, trespassing in my barn, Hamus Dart?"

"Now, now." Merkill was rubbing his hands, smoothing the air with little patting gestures. "We're just part of the audience."

"Then where's your tickets? . . . Huh, thought as much by your looks. Then you'll pay right now."

PUNCH AND JUDY

And Uncle Kermit regarded the money suspiciously as though disappointed that it wasn't lead slugs.

Merkill's voice was raised in protest. "I'm here on behalf of my client."

"You are, hey? Got a license to practice in this state?"

Now that was clever! Kitt blew back the lock above her eyes and cocked her head sideways. It took a man to think of things like that. For the little gingery lawyer had begun to droop, seemed anxious to take cover behind Mr. Dart. The tent owner started to explain, but Peter's uncle cut it short.

"Permit? Don't need a permit for a charity performance like this. Benefit of the Dogs' Hospital." Uncle Kermit winked at Kitt and was obviously enjoying himself. "And now the show's over and you've had your quarter's worth you'd best get going. If I see your faces much longer, I might get it into my mind to drop round to the courthouse. They'd be interested in a man who practices law without a license and another who demands money by threats."

That sent the two hurrying toward the door, with Uncle Kermit's mild voice behind them. "Don't know as mebbe I won't anyway. Town needs money and a hundred dollars in fines would come right handy."

Helen Pettijohn had miraculously returned to life. "I don't know how to thank you, Uncle . . . er . . . Mr. . . ."

"Uncle Kermit' don't sound so bad when you say

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

it, young lady." He shook her hand gravely. "And it's the Dogs' Hospital that has to thank you and these other two. For five dollars, say?"

"Ten!" amended Helen.

"Ten it is then." You could see that Uncle Kermit was pleased.

Helen wanted to pay Ginty's scouts, too, but Ginty explained that scouts can't take money, and anyway they'd had a fine time. Uncle Kermit led off the cohorts for doughnuts and milk, and Helen was thrusting bills and handfuls of change at Kitt and Sunny.

"Sorry. Can't be done!" Sunny was firm. "We were just pinch-hitting for the Pettijohn show. Besides, we had a good engagement yesterday and the day before; we're just rolling in wealth." And Kitt joined her in smothering Helen's grateful protests.

With Peter, Ginty, and a group of milky mouthed scouts intent on piling up their credit score, they stowed stage, props and puppets in record time. All except Betsy Ross. Kitt dangled her by her strings, as though weighing something in her mind. A moment she whispered to Sunny, and Sunny, good girl, nodded emphatic agreement.

"Look here, Helen," Kitt started, then appealed to her partner.

"What she's trying to say is that she wants the Pettijohn Punch and Judy to adopt Betsy Ross, as a souvenir of the occasion." Sunny explained.

"Oh . . . oh . . . oh!" Helen's little squeal of de-

PUNCH AND JUDY

light was worth more than formal thanks. "Do you really mean it? Can you *really* spare her?"

She was still admiring Betsy when Peter and Ginty carted out the last box, and the girls prepared to follow. At last, with the marionette beneath her arm, Helen followed Kitt and Sunny to their car.

"It'll be dull going back to my old Punch and Judy after seeing your show to-day," she said with dancing eyes as Sunny started the engine. "I've heard a lot about the Kitt-Cat Marionettes but I'm sure that even they can't be any better than yours."

"No. . . . Oh, no." Kitt had looked blank for an instant. "They're not any better," she laughed. "You see, we generally *are* the Kitt-Cat Marionettes!"

Chapter Eighteen

STRANDED

LIFE, these days seemed to be spent either behind a masking curtain, or hurrying from some place to some other place in the big car. Sleep and meals must have happened, of course, but there seemed always to be details of the next engagement, improvements on the last performance, to be discussed over the hasty sandwiches and milk, or else elaborate lunches and dinners with various officers of the camps, more nerve-racking even than the performances themselves but on which future engagements might depend. Sleep, for the most part, had been mere blessed oblivion, and that hardly counted.

Financial success, too. "Where did you put the check from the last Cedarbrook place?" Kitt asked.

"It's safe in the back. In Red Riding Hood's basket." Sunny, like a wise driver, kept her eyes on the road. "I thought it would be better not to cash it at the

STRANDED

camp, but the garage man took twenty-five for that damaged axle and ball-race. Anyway, if I lose my purse or meet a pickpocket, the check is safe. How about lunch?"

That was reassuring, though it might have better, thought the cautious Kitt, to have sent the check home by registered mail, as smaller sums had gone. Money itself still seemed like an un hoped-for prize, rather than the earnings they worked for and earned. It was difficult to believe they had had this string of successes but there was Mr. Fairweather's monthly financial report to prove it. And, of course, Kitt's consultation list, as Sunny called it, just above eye level in the car. That, more than anything, made her feel that the whole thing was reality. And that, with the list of probabilities for next summer, was almost a sign that college for the year after might be possible.

For the college fund was growing, week by week. But it was curious that their greatest help had been people's absurd contempt for marionettes. Give them a good show, and both children and adults, but adults particularly, were actually surprised into wild enthusiasm. And for weeks Sunny and Kitt hadn't had a thought outside marionettes. Even now—there was Joey's broken hand.

"Adhesive tape would do," Kitt remarked, thinking aloud.

"For lunch? Oh, honey!" Sunny's eyes crinkled with amusement. "The taste would be awful!" She

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

edged cautiously around a big truck, slid expertly between an old lady in a Baby Austin and a rattling farm wagon, and pulled up for a traffic light. Ahead of them stretched an elm-lined street, cool and shady, bordered on one side by a small park, on the other by stores. The light changed, Sunny slipped into a parking space and stopped the car. "Here's a drug store, Kitt. Hurry up with your tape, I'm starving."

"Uh-huh." Kitt was already out on the sidewalk. A moment later she returned with a suggestion. "That's an awfully pretty drug store—white and silver, and cool." She tossed a small parcel in beside the sleeping Low Jinks at the back of the car. "Why don't we," pausing with the door half open, "go in and lunch there?"

Sunny voted that the bright idea of the day and jumped out, slamming the door on her side. She glanced back at it. "Guess everything's all right. We'll sit where we can see it. I won't bother to lock up, with Low Jinks inside as watch dog."

Kitt's recent thoughts, with a different twist, must also have been passing in Sunny's mind. Scanning the long list of iced temptations on the menu she proclaimed a public holiday, decreed a celebration. Kitt, only half protesting, was overruled.

"I may be in college before we get another chance," Sunny continued. "And we still have a five dollar bill to see us through the punctures and perils of the road. Besides, we've just *got* to."

STRANDED

Both were conscious of their triumphs, that glorious feeling which comes but once or twice in a lifetime—when you're doing a job that you love, and know by every possible proof that you're doing it better than you ever dreamed you could. They had conquered it all now, from balky curtains to stage fright, from meeting new prospects to collecting the check when the performance was over. It was amusing that, temporarily, they were broke. Except, of course, for the five dollars.

A waitress, cool and dainty in gray uniform and green apron, arrived with the loaded tray. Huge three-decker sandwiches, earned with aching arms behind the masking curtain; a giant foaming chocolate malted special for Kitt, payment for hands shaking with fright as she awkwardly fumbled with Joey's strings; for Sunny a tall frosted glass of iced coffee, reward for plugging doggedly through half a performance, extemporizing as she went, because the exact words of the show had, for the moment, gone clean out of her head. And, to follow all this feast, two huge nut chocolate ice creams with marshmallows, a bonus voted unanimously by the directors of the successful Kitt-Cat Marionette Company.

Kitt's face emerged from the first delicious draught of chocolate malted, wreathed in appreciative smiles and a circle of froth. "Ouf. . . . I needed that. Listen, Sunny." She waved an excited spoon. "I think . . . well, I'm almost sure there's something else to

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

celebrate, too." She stopped for words. Funny, but failure seemed easier to face than an anticipated success. There was a risk about such daydreams, they might dissolve before you could grasp them.

"That bank account of ours, my share of it I mean—if we have luck *next* summer, too, I'll really be able to get to college after all."

"Luck!" Sunny struck a melodramatic pose with knife and fork upright on the table. "A Kitt-Cat is always lucky! And in college, no reason why . . ." and that was a thought, "we shouldn't have the Kitt-Cat Company all the way through, as soon as you come to join me. But I do wish," she paused to regret, "we hadn't put so much money into that new Rapunzel act. We've still got Dad's loan to pay off and possibly some other bills to take care of. We've had no time to rehearse Rapunzel and Humpty Dumpty. And we certainly shan't need 'em this year."

"Oh, no, we *had* to do that," even the cautious Kitt protested. That was all good business. A penny's worth of seed for a dollar's worth of fruit. And if they were to keep those engagements already booked for next summer there wouldn't be time, this winter, with Sunny away in college, for them to rehearse new acts the way they'd done last spring. Kitt had worked at these two, Rapunzel—"Rapunzel, let down your hair"—and the Prince, and the old Witch, as well as

STRANDED

Humpty Dumpty and Alice, at odd moments all summer, between shows when Sunny was thinking out new lines, before breakfasts and after dinners when she was almost too weary to keep her eyes open or see the next stitch to be taken. But the two were complete now, packed together in one of the cases in the car.

"But we did put a lot of money into them." Sunny was still remorseful. "How about these people we're going to to-morrow? The Sweetbriar Camps? Are they good for another season?"

They had finished the gala lunch, and Sunny took the check. Then, as Kitt, the pessimist, might have feared, fell the first shadow of disaster. Sunny produced the bill from her pocketbook. A dollar bill. She gazed at it blankly, scrabbled desperately in her bag. In a small, meek voice she declared, "I could have sworn it was a five. Kitt, *have* you got any change?"

Kitt had. Beneath the amused eyes of the waitress they delved and searched for coins, just covered the check and had a quarter and a penny to spare.

"Whew, that's awkward! Enough for gas, with luck. But nothing for accidents, or for luxuries. Even a meal, a bed or a puncture."

"We'll sponge on the Sweetbriar Camp then, or ask them to take it off our payment." Once the blow had fallen, Kitt never worried. Any one could be brave, she felt, when the worst had already happened.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

When the worst? When—a glance through the window. Surely the car—it had been there, right in front of the drug store. And now?

“Heavens above!” Sunny had made the same discovery. “Kitt! The car is gone!”

Chapter Nineteen

RECOVERY

THE marionettes, their whole show, gone. The car, their only way of getting their next meal or night's lodging, gone. But worse than either of these, Low Jinks was in that car just disappearing round the corner of the block. The Kitt-Cat show and the car were replaceable. But Low Jinks, never.

Not that Kitt had time to separate these thoughts and various losses. It was all one black incredible tragedy. Sunny, though,—why was she dashing back into the drug store? The quiet little man who had been drinking coffee at a back table shambled forward as she asked something of the man at the desk.

“Your car? Yes, I saw a man get into the big tan car and drive away. Shouldn't have left it unlocked, Miss.” He slapped a coin on the counter and swiftly, but unhurried, led the way outside toward a motorcycle and side car parked at the curb a little way down the block.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

"Hop in," he ordered crisply.

Sunny glanced at Kitt, Kitt at Sunny.

"Both, if you can make it. You're light." He kicked the engine into a roar.

"But what . . . who?" stammered Kitt, wondering at his quick taking over of their troubles, but squeezing obediently next to Sunny in the narrow side car.

The shabby little man grinned and flipped back the lapel of his wrinkled black coat to show a shining metal star. So sheriffs actually did wear such things, outside the movies! Then thought, or anyhow speech, became impossible. Under its powerful acceleration the machine shot forward, pressing Sunny against the back of the seat. Kitt endeavored to curl up in the front, against Sunny's thin knees. A momentary slackening of gait, for the change of gear, and the engine's drone dropped to a lower note, then rose rapidly again. Air was buffeting Kitt's flushed face, roared past her ears, snatching at her hair.

"To the right. . . . I saw him turn down the right!" shouted Kitt. The man must have heard. He nodded.

Round the corner, the horn screaming its siren alarm, in one mad, breath-taking swerve. A swift gathering of speed again. "There's only one road; we can't miss him." Kitt heard, or guessed, the words. Then, "Hold tight!" in warning as they hit the open spaces of the concrete road and slid, unheeding, past the last red traffic light of the town. They bounced,

RECOVERY

wobbled desperately, straightened out again and had their noses still to the trail.

A dignified black sedan dropped, with a *whoof*, behind them, a scandalized driver shaking his head at them. A casual Ford, cutting across the white line at the corner, nearly caused disaster, but somehow they missed it. Kitt wondered whether the sheriff took his number. And ever the note of the engine rose higher, higher.

What could they be doing now? Forty? Or would it be sixty? You couldn't tell. It seemed more like a hundred, so near the ground, so unprotected by roof or side windows. More like flying than motor-ing.

"We'll catch him." Sunny's head bobbed down against Kitt's ear. "Not even a thief can knock more'n fifty out of our old bus."

Without taking his eyes from the road ahead, the sheriff grinned encouragement. His mouth had opened, but his words were torn away by the rush of wind. It was glorious, thrilling, this wild race. But also it was . . . ouch . . . painful! Sunny, in the padded seat might be better off, but Kitt, crouching at her feet, banged first one side of the small body, then the other, as the outfit swung swiftly to the corners.

Ahead, on the straight road, she could see a car. It was hard to identify it, as you jounced and rattled, hard to see anything but a blur, through streaming, wind reddened eyes. Then . . . yes, that was their

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

tan car, definitely. And the driver, in answer to the motorcycle's frantic tooting, was slowing down, trying to look innocent. The sheriff slackened his pace behind the other.

"That it?" he asked the girls.

Both Sunny and Kitt nodded vigorously. The driving license, and the insurance papers in the side pocket, would serve to identify it for them. Besides . . . and Kitty thought of it with a pang of unhappiness for the little dog . . . there was Low Jinks. Why wasn't he scrabbling at the side windows, barking, with flapping ears, in excitement and fury, as one would have expected? Could something have happened to him? Could the thief, in order to get away with the car, have made away with Jinks? Kitt struggled to thrust the thought out of her mind.

They were alongside, the sheriff showing his badge, signing to the man to draw to the edge of the road. The car pulled up, the motorcycle crowded in just ahead of it. Well, thank heaven, there hadn't been any shooting yet! And the sheriff was at the window, talking to the man, motioning for Kitt and Sunny to get out of the side car.

It wasn't so easy to unfold bruised, cramped legs. And now that the chase was over, Kitt, on her feet again, felt weak and shaky. The physical excitement had been a relief; it was the unpleasantness which might follow that she dreaded. Suppose the man had a gun. Suppose he refused to allow their claim . . .

RECOVERY

"Says it's his own," the sheriff announced. Then to the man, "Well, show your papers!"

The man's hand went to the left pocket of the car. Kitt noticed the sheriff's hand stray to his hip, saw that he swung round so as to keep between them and the car. But the car thief had no such desperate idea. Every one keeps his papers in the left-hand pocket, but these weren't the correct papers, the ones he expected. Obviously, as he glanced at them, then looked further at the name, Miss Catharine Fairweather, his astonishment was genuine.

A grin of genuine apology spread across his somewhat unpleasant face. "Say . . . sorry! There's a slip-up somewhere here." He passed the papers to the waiting sheriff, turned to glance behind him at the cases in the car, seemed puzzled.

"You Miss Fairweather?" The sheriff glanced at Kitt, who shook her head, indicating Sunny.

"Catharine Fairweather," said Sunny.

"That's right. Seventeen. Liskeard. All right. Hop in there and drive her back. Ain't room in there for all of us. You . . ." he addressed the man. "I'll have to take you back."

But the man was trying to bluster it out. "Look here, there's no need for all this. I'm quite willing to pay for any damage I've done—say, five dollars. And whatever time you've wasted—say, another ten. That'll teach me, I guess," he tried to smile apologetically, "to be careful."

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

"Get out!" The sheriff's tone was curt. A jerk of his head indicated the side car of the motorcycle. "Follow us back, will you, Miss?"

Sunny nodded.

Sullenly the man climbed down and stood in the road; he was a shabby man with a flashy diamond ring on one soiled hand, a torn tie, a very new cap over a long, hard-looking face.

Sunny took her accustomed place at the wheel. But Jinks . . . Low Jinks? Where was he? Kitt opened the back door and whistled. "Jinks!" she called anxiously. "*Jinks!*"

Something stirred on top the piled cases that nearly filled the back of the car; a sleek, seal-black head raised itself to expose a wide, delicate yawn. Slowly Low Jinks got to his feet, the perfect gentleman disturbed at his afternoon nap, and ambled leisurely down, wagging his tail.

"What a watch dog!" exclaimed Sunny. The man scratched a puzzled head. Kitt bent to scoop up her darling and climbed into the car.

On the way back, following closely behind the motorcycle, Kitt and Sunny discussed the recent affair. It hardly seemed possible that the man could have taken their car by mistake; new cars can, of course, be identical if of the same make and type; but with every dent and scratch, every additional repair, cars of the same model and year grow utterly distinct. Even the feel you get in driving one becomes charac-



The perfect gentleman, disturbed at his afternoon nap!

RECOVERY

teristic of that car, and of no other. Why, the man couldn't have driven ten feet without recognizing that it wasn't his own. Could he perhaps have mistaken it for some one else's? And if it were really an innocent mistake, why had he been willing to pay out fifteen dollars rather than return and make, or prove, a simple explanation? But if he weren't innocent, and it began to look as if he were not, why on earth should he steal an old ark like this, with a load of things that would certainly have no market value, and one not-so-very-valuable dachshund?

Still puzzled, they reached the police station. They gave their statements to the officer at the desk, answered a number of questions, were asked to read over what had been taken down, and to sign it. The man, however, still protesting his innocence, refused to make any statement, and put in two telephone calls, one for a bail bond, the other for a lawyer.

"You'd better stick around, you two," the sheriff told the girls. "Case'll be up to-morrow before the magistrate. If 'twas an ordinary motor offense now, we'd a' had it weighed off to-day. But there's more to this. . . ."

"But we must get on! We've simply got to get on!" Sunny was horrified. "We've spent our last dollar, we haven't enough with us to pay for even a night's lodging, and we've an engagement to play at the Sweetbriar Camps to-morrow. That's about twenty-five miles beyond here. It isn't our fault he took the car."

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

"And we haven't made any charges against him," Kitt remembered to say.

"Play?" The sheriff had grasped the one word that interested him. "What kind of a play? You don't look like theater folks."

Kitt explained. "Marionettes."

"Mary-and-ettes?" The word obviously meant nothing to him. Kitt dashed out to the car. She must somehow impress the sheriff and the police with the seriousness of the Kitt-Cat show. An instant later she was back with George, not Jinks's George, but the new Washington of the flag-making scene, beneath her arm. The other puppets might have been too frivolous, but surely the Father of his Country would prove sufficiently impressive. She unwound his strings, tested the control, thrust it into Sunny's hand.

Sunny, hopping on a chair, went into the flag-making bit.

"This then, Mistress Betsy, shall be the banner of our new nation. Proudly, before all the countries shall it wave, o'er the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave, a symbol of our new liberty and independence."

With a noble flourish of one small hand, George ended his speech. The car thief scratched his head. The sheriff cleared his throat in a puzzled fashion.

"Oh . . . oh! Dollies, eh?" was what he said.

Chapter Twenty

MISSING MARIONETTES

WELL, that was that. The man had been given bail and the police wanted to hold the case over until they could have a chance to prove some of their dark suspicions. Sunny and Kitt, having left their own and their parents' names and addresses, were still violently discussing the case as the big shabby tan car carried them out of the town.

This man, what did the police think he really was? It had been an awfully easy theft, of course. Sunny bitterly blamed herself for having been so stupid as to leave the key in the switch.

"But why on earth he should take our battered bus among all those others!" she worried. "It's not a car I'd choose, if I were an up-and-coming car thief."

"He didn't exactly look like an amateur," admitted Kitt. "But maybe he really was telling the truth, that he mistook it for another one. There actually was an-

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

other, same make and rather like ours, parked down the block. I wonder why . . .” She paused, as though struck by an idea.

“Wonder why what?” They passed the last traffic light, swung out onto the concrete with a speed designed to make up part of the time lost at the police station.

“Oh, only if . . .” Kitt pondered slowly. “If it was the truth, what he said, that there actually was another car, and I have a hunch that’s true, why did he have to get bail? Why didn’t he simply produce the other car? That would have proved his argument beyond any question. There’s something strange about that.”

With the problem still unsolved they passed the place where the arrest had been made. An engagement before them, probably the final show of the season, they lost interest in such past events as were unrelated to the marionette business and swung back to the usual discussion of the last performance, a form of conversation so prevalent in this combination of the Newcomb-Fairweather families that there were audible sighs of relief from both households, once Kitt and Sunny were ready to depart for another engagement. Mr. Fairweather had been heard to mutter in a moment of temporary rebellion against his rôle of financial advisor, that he ate, talked, and even sat upon puppets in every room in the house, and even big brother Bill, for all his interest and help in the mario-

MISSING MARIONETTES

nette theater, had once thrown up his hands and begged, "For Pete's sake, Kitt, lay off it! I can't pass a toy shop window nowadays without feeling faint!"

But it was interesting. It really was. Even the same program turned out differently each time you gave it. Partly because, on these one-night stands, your hall, your audience and everything else differed from those of every other performance, and some marionettes were as temperamental as opera stars. It wasn't just stage fright that dried your mouth, made your fingers shake so that the strings tangled and you could yelp and bite the masking curtain with exasperation. Barnacle Bill had a trick, for instance, of going limp, half-seas over. It might be in character, but it was most disconcerting when his head suddenly dropped back, flabby and uncontrolled; and there were times when Joey, the clown, distinctly overacted. One night during a performance his head had come entirely loose from his body. Kitt had drawn a quick curtain and attached the head with a few swift, strong stitches. On his reappearance Joey had squeaked, "Well, folks, that was one time I just lost my head!"

And human contacts were part of the fun. There were people who made such long-winded introductions that you had to cut part of the show to get it through in time; people who glibly promised their audience such marvels as no performance could fulfill; people who didn't know a thing about marionettes—and they *always* made speeches. Then there

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

were the ones who insisted on hanging around behind the scenes, who "wanted to see the little actors work," who wanted to help. Some, of course, were honestly useful, like that girl, Geraldine Something-or-other, at the last place.

"Was she any good?" asked Sunny.

Kitt nodded. "Quite good. She'd made marionettes. Her stringing was different from ours. I showed her Barnacle Bill and then Rapunzel and let her try them out. She had good hands for the work, strong and big."

"That must have been when I was collecting the check. You got everything in the car all right?"

Kitt nodded again, absently viewing her tangled hair in her pocket mirror. "Goodness, we'd better stop somewhere and clean up before we get out to Sweetbriar. After that ride in the side car I look more like the wild woman of the circus than a respectable business woman."

Sweetbriar Camp, totem pole, cypress, log cabin gatehouse and all swung into view. And none too soon. The gas tank registered zero, purses and stomachs nearly the same. The place seemed unusually busy. Instead of a couple of cars, the camp director's and one of his counselor's, the parking space was filled with gleaming sedans, huge, antique touring cars and even two station wagons.

"Can I squeeze the bus in there, Kitt? Hop out and see if I'm likely to scratch that big green dragon.

MISSING MARIONETTES

Looks like the crowd at a county fair, doesn't it? Wonder what's up?"

Kitt shoved on ahead to the office, to Mr. Pensilva whom she already knew slightly. Diffidently she began to explain the reason of their unheralded and premature arrival and was somewhat astonished when the plump, pleasant little camp manager leaped from his chair and rushed to the door.

"Both? Both? Both? *And* the marionettes?" he barked.

"Oh, yes, we're both here." Kitt followed him to the veranda and indicated the car.

"Young woman, you're heaven-sent. If I had thought I could have got you to-day by 'phone, I'd have sent for you. You'll want food, of course. And a cabin, right away. Even if we have to throw somebody out." And at Kitt's blank stare, he explained, "We've got a hundred and fifty counselors and heads of camps here, for the conference. Other camps are closed, as you know. We stay open a bit later. We've fed 'em and talked to 'em and said everything there has to be said. But they're not leaving till to-morrow morning, and there's still to-night, and they've got to be amused." He was hurrying so, toward the car, that Kitt had to trot to keep up with him.

Mr. Pensilva himself helped to unload the car and to carry the cases to one end of the long dining hall, where the stage would be set up. Having thus made sure that they would be on hand, he showed them

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

their individual cottage and was forced to rush away to other affairs.

A long youth with an Adam's apple gangled up, announced that he was "Hank," and laid hold of the cases. Who Hank was, whether handyman, counselor or otherwise, they never discovered. His trick was to stand off, measure objects with his eye and speculate on whether they fitted, then silently fit them together. Obviously, he knew nothing of marionette work, and, equally obviously, that worried him not at all; but in the rush and bustle of this emergency performance the Kitt-Cats found him a rock on which they could lean with amazing surety.

"No, that's the masking curtain. It goes on the rods there." Kitt threw him a direction over her shoulder as she screwed the fragile footlights into their sockets.

This engagement was a gorgeous piece of luck, wonderful mostly for the future prospects it might develop for other camps, but for the moment Kitt's gratitude was for the crisp crinkly dollar bills it would bring in. So much of the summer's work could be measured in prospects, in what you might call good will, and the actual takings. They had, of course, a real bank account now, but even that, with debts repaid and expenses taken out, wouldn't go far towards college tuition, not if you cut it in two, one half for Sunny, one half for Kitt. And college . . .

"All up? That's fine." Kitt broke her thoughts to give further suggestions. Sunny was busy with the

MISSING MARIONETTES

gramophone, sorting out the records in order of their use in the various acts. Kitt herself would attend to the puppets. "The empty cases will go back there, in a moment. Where's the nearest floor plug, for the lights?"

Hank found it and plugged in. Kitt tested flood lights, footlights and baby spot, still thinking. Tonight's show must be the best they had ever given, since it was certainly the most important. If only the Rapunzel and Humpty Dumpty acts had been ready! So much time and effort had gone into those, for next year's program; to-day could have been a sort of preview, announced exclusively for these camp people, of what they could hire for next summer.

"Put those boxes," she glanced up, "behind the curtain now. I'll unpack them in a minute." Lights right. Music right. Stage up. That left marionettes, prompt scripts to set up, though actually they never needed those any more, props to get out. Sunny, as property man, could deal with those.

A woman in an apron, with two suppers on a long tray, appeared in the darkening doorway. Bless Mr. Pensilva for his thoughtfulness! He was sure, the woman said, that the girls would prefer not to have to appear at the long and tiresome dinner where every one would be making speeches, but could have a quick meal on a tray and a rest of an hour or more before the performance.

Followed by gratitude, Hank melted tactfully

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

through the doorway and they were left alone in the big echoing hall. Sunny finished sorting the props, shoved in her hairpins, surveyed her dusty hands with a little grimace of distaste, rubbed them on her soiled smock and sank into a chair. Kitt surveyed the tray. Hot soup, cold salad, a pile of sandwiches. But even when contemplating food, her mind was not entirely free of the job.

Idly, a sandwich in her fingers, her eyes roamed across the stage, checking, counting, sorting mentally. Those two cases of marionettes . . . she bit into the sandwich . . . there should be three more, shouldn't there? Oh, yes, there was another . . .

With a little squeal of dismay she leaped to her feet. "*Sunny!* We took everything out of the car, didn't we? . . . *Did* we? . . . Because two cases of marionettes are missing!"

Hastily they verified the count. It was, alas, true! When Geraldine What's-her-name had helped Kitt pack, back in the last Cedarbrook Camp, two cases, almost half their actors for to-night's performance, had been left behind.

Chapter Twenty-One

GOOD NEWS

THERE was a moment's horrified silence. Two cases gone? But they couldn't be, they simply *must* be somewhere about! Kitt was certain that the car had been completely unloaded; still, those missing cases might have been put down somewhere beside it, or left halfway between car and hall. She hurried out.

A few minutes later, hot and flushed, she was back. Sunny had only to see her face to know the bad news.

"We couldn't have lost them!" wailed Kitt, bewildered. "We simply couldn't!"

Sunny, head in hands, was trying to think. When had they used those cases last? Well, in yesterday's Cedarbrook Camp, of course, for they'd given the entire revue there. But since then? "Do you suppose that car thief could possibly have stolen 'em?" A mad idea, but any idea was worth following at this moment.

Kitt's headshake was emphatic. "No. You remem-

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

ber he was really surprised when he saw the marionettes. Besides, he didn't have time to throw anything out of the car, and he hadn't even disturbed Jinks, in the back."

Jinks, at his name, pricked ears and gazed, bright eyed, from the cushion of his battered George. Kitt was recounting the cases for the tenth time. "Three . . . six . . . seven . . . eight. Oh, Sunny! . . ." She sank limply to the floor, as though her legs would no longer support her. "I know what happened. All summer I've been counting eight cases. But this trip we had two extra: the cases with the Humpty Dumpty and Rapunzel acts. So when I counted them the last time, in Cedarbrook Camp . . . you remember, you were off seeing about that check . . . why I counted the usual number. And Geraldine was helping me, so I never noticed any had been left out."

Kitt had discovered it, of course. What were they to do about it? Kitt said there wasn't anything to do about it. She'd go out and confess the worst to Mr. Pensilva, who had relied so much on their help this evening. But they couldn't give a performance until the missing cases of marionettes were recovered. Tomorrow would be all right, a sixty-mile drive back to the last camp . . . with, of course, an advance loan from Mr. Pensilva to pay for gas and food on the way.

Sunny suddenly interrupted. "What's missing?"

"What? . . ." Stopped in mid-argument Kitt looked blank.

GOOD NEWS

"Which puppets?" Sunny's voice was impatient.

"Oh. Why, there's little Red Riding Hood, her grandmother and the Wolf. Sojo. And, of course, Joey. He *would* be missing," she commented bitterly. Joey was consistently the most temperamental of the troupe. "That breaks up three acts and the introducer."

Sunny, on her feet, was pacing up and down. "We could use any of the others almost for introducer. The bear for instance. Might be rather a good idea. What kind of a voice, I wonder? . . . 'Ladies and Gentlemen' . . ." A furry sort of voice, choked, Winnie-the-Poohish. Sunny experimented several times with the sort of voice a stuffed bear might have. Kitt moved impatiently.

"Perhaps. But the other acts? . . ."

"Put on your new ones. Rapunzel and Humpty Dumpty," was Sunny's astounding idea, which, queerly, seemed to echo Kitt's own unexpressed wish of a half hour back: "Wouldn't it be nice if one could show the Rapunzel, give these camp heads an idea, a preview of next summer's program?" But no. Impossible. Absolutely.

"Humphy Dumpty, we . . . el . . ." she admitted slowly, and picking up a sandwich from the tray beside her bit into it mechanically. "Sunny, I'm starving.—But the Rapunzel. . . . I don't really know it. It's so long and complicated. All those scenes."

Sunny paused in her stride, and with arms akimbo gazed down masterfully at the seated Kitt. Of course

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

Kitt knew it. Why she had been plugging away at it for weeks and weeks. "Come on." Sunny waved a forceful arm. "We'll have a rehearsal. Two of 'em, three, . . . or twenty. From now until the performance. Kitt, you've *got* to." And as Kitt still seemed unconvinced, Sunny added, "We can't let them down. This is the most important evening of our whole career."

Kitt gazed open mouthed as the determined Sunny began to sweep marionettes into her arm, gathered up the Rapunzel back drop, and props and started for the door. "There's an empty cottage over there." Sunny paused in the doorway. "Looks like an arts and crafts room, or something. Hurry up. We can use that for rehearsal."

Dragged forward on the wave of her partner's enthusiasm but with all her inherent pessimism clamoring for outlet, Kitt followed reluctantly. At the entrance to the room she glanced back. There was the supper tray, almost untouched, on the table. Her arms were full. No matter. One sandwich in her mouth, retriever fashion, the remainder in the pocket of her smock, marionettes beneath either arm, gingerly holding a glass of milk in each hand, she bumped through the screen door behind Sunny.

Then began an hour of such tumultuous rush as not even the Kitt-Cats, with all their various stormy vicissitudes, had hitherto encountered. The empty arts and

GOOD NEWS

crafts room, hot and dusty, echoed to Kitt's changing intonations as she perched on a bench, controls in hand, and went over and over the lines of her characters. Over and over and over. Across the short space to the dining hall, lights flashed on, a gong urged diners to the late meal, where crowds of laughing, chattering campers and camp officials swarmed through the doors; silver clattered on plates, screen doors slapped softly as waiters sped in and out with trays of appetizing food. But still the rehearsal did not stop.

Sunny, prompting from a sheaf of typescript, gave Kitt her cues, held out and received in turn the various puppets as they were wanted or had played their parts. Fortunately the show was not entirely new to her, but to-night the player must be letter perfect, and Kitt was closer to that standard than was Sunny.

Humpty Dumpty, a short act, was simple. They raced through it once, Sunny memorizing the lines as she went along, then again more slowly, to be sure of the business, and with a sigh of relief, laid it aside knowing that it, at least, was certain. Kitt bit absently into her third sandwich and clambered back onto the bench with Rapunzel in her hands. Sunny set out the tiny spinning wheel, and the Princess went into a long monologue of lamentation over her sorry lot, alone in the tower and at the mercy of the cruel witch.

For the entrance of the witch, Sunny must take over the control stick of the Princess, since it was now the

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

witch's part to move about, Rapunzel's to remain still. This necessitated considerable changing on the bridge, crossing back and forth, never an easy task. But they had done this a few times before and to-night they'd simply have to make the best of it.

Somehow, between speeches and gulps, the supper was over, though neither was conscious of what she ate. Kitt glanced down once at the milk glass in her hand and was vaguely surprised to find it empty. She set it down without being aware that she was no longer so ravenously hungry. For the fourth time they were starting the show when an interruption occurred. Some one knocked at the door; the light was switched on. Kitt blinked. It had been dark then, or almost so.

Sunny was wearily shoving in hairpins with hot, sticky hands.

"Thought as how you might be here." It was the drawling voice of Hank. "'S one o' you ladies Mis' Fairweather? You? Well, they's two Mist'ers . . ."

Behind him pleasant, familiar tones interrupted, "Catharine! Kitt!" and "Hey, you two!"

Kitt saw the red head of Peter French flaunting through the dusk, watched with dazed amazement as Sunny flung herself into her father's arms.

"Dad! How perfectly grand of you! And you'll both be here in time to christen the new performance!"

"Oh, I suppose so!" he groaned in mock resignation. He had come, it seemed, from Liskeard in an-

GOOD NEWS

swer to the sheriff's 'phone call about the car thief. Peter French, passing the house in his car, had offered a lift. "I imagine he hasn't seen as many marionettes as I have." But Mr. Fairweather seemed to approve of the manner in which the girls had handled a difficult situation, and had further news of the car thief.

"Dad, you've just got to sit down and be audience." Sunny plumped him firmly into a chair, waved Peter to another. "We've got only forty minutes more and we want to go through this thing again. Awfully important . . ." Between gasps of explanation she swung back to the marionettes. A nod over her shoulder at Kitt. "Straight through it, from the beginning?"

It seemed to Kitt that it wasn't humanly possible for her to go through with it again. But a sort of second courage, born of the lights which Hank had switched on, of red-headed Peter's presence, of the desire to earn Mr. Fairweather's approval and, most of all, of that feeling which theater folk develop, of rallying all one's best when it is needed for an audience, came to her rescue. Peter and Mr. Fairweather listened with genuine attention. Hank lounged in the background, uttering amused chuckles. It was crude of course, no footlights, no back drop; controls and strings in full view; no illusions. But it went smoothly; it got over.

Once they were stopped by a suggestion. "I think

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

the witch's laugh should be more like this: 'Heh . . . heh . . . heh!' " Mr. Fairweather gave a chuckling sneer.

"Grand!" nodded Sunny. "Try it, Kitt."

Kitt tried. And failed and tried again. Yes, that was better; it marked the old woman more clearly from the Princess. "'Heh . . . heh . . . heh, you wicked girl! You haven't finished your spinning for the day. I shall return in half an hour. Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair. Heh . . . heh . . . heh!'"

A spatter of applause from the three-man-power audience. Kitt slumped breathlessly onto her bench, triumphantly conscious that she had gone through this time without missing a cue.

"Very good, indeed. But how long have you two youngsters been at this? You look pretty fagged."

"Dinner's over," laconically volunteered young Hank. "They'll be wantin' you soon, I guess." And, murmuring that he'd go and see, he drifted toward the dining hall.

From Sunny's limp fingers dangled the witch. "What's the news, Dad?"

It would, he thought, keep until after the performance, but he could give them a bit of encouragement. Just a few days ago he had been talking to Mr. Newcomb about the Kitt-Cats and their summer's work. Kitt's father had then drawn his attention to a point he had not hitherto considered.

GOOD NEWS

Mr. Fairweather paused provocatively, but Sunny merely stifled a yawn of weariness.

"Look here, you girls are dead tired. Do you have to go on?"

"Got to. But if you've any good news, Dad, be a sport and cheer us up."

Well, Dad's point was that the girls hadn't cost their families anything for bed, board and amusements for more than half the summer. So it seemed only fair that some proportion of what each had saved her household should be paid into the account of Kitt-Cat and Company. For traveling expenses, for personal use, for further marionettes; even for that college fund of Kitt's; whatever they wished. "We thought about fifty each," he said. "And moreover . . ."

Hank had drifted back. "Kin you be ready in twenty minutes?" he queried doubtfully.

Could they? With the crust of a vanished sandwich in her fingers Kitt began to scramble up props and puppets. Had she thought she was tired? Nonsense! Fifty dollars, fifty crisp crackling one dollar bills nearer to college. . . . Glorious! She popped the last crumbs of sandwich into her mouth, rolled it about on her tongue.

What was that familiar flavor? Shades of the Adirondack Camp! She had eaten straight through six salmon sandwiches and never noticed it at all!

Chapter Twenty-Two

SUCCESS

HANK, Peter, and Mr. Fairweather, with armfuls of marionettes, followed the girls into the big hall. Kitt, hanging the puppets ready for their entrance, thought with bitter envy of those scores and scores of people gathering out front who didn't have to do a thing, remember a thing, who could just sit still all evening and enjoy themselves. She'd think of that next time she went to the theater, and throw a crumb of pity to the other side of the footlights.

Her icy fingers touched the pile of back drop curtains to be sure they were close at hand, ready to switch into place. Then she gave the curtain cord a little tug, to be certain it would glide open freely when needed. And consciously she swallowed for the tenth time. Always there was that nightmare feeling, just before the rise of the curtain, that her voice might forsake her just when she needed it. It never had, of course. But the wretched fear still persisted.

SUCCESS

With one eye to a narrow slit in the big front curtain, Sunny was reporting on the house: "Biggest one we've ever had, Kitt. And all so . . . o important looking. Oh, here comes another group in evening dress. My dear, I feel like a prima donna in grand opera."

"Uh-huh," murmured Kitt, soundlessly rehearsing Rapunzel's first speech, but with her mind a long way off. The whole day, the entire afternoon, had been such a whirl of events, and now Peter was here, and there was this exciting addition to the college fund. Oh, dear. If she could have only half an hour alone, or fifteen, ten minutes, in which to think about this, in which to digest the glorious news. . . . Violently she brought her mind back to the present scene. House lights were dimmed, footlights went on, and out in front the buzz of conversation had sunk to a murmur of interest. Sunny's eyes were on her.

"Ready?" formed Sunny's lips.

The audience was theirs from the start. Here was no small-boy audience challenging the marionettes to amuse it, no group of bored young girls more interested in the dance that might follow than in the entertainment provided for them. Maybe camp directors and officials knew, from another angle, the difficulty of amusing people, and met one more than half way. There was a ripple of applause as the bear finished Joey's usual speech. Good, that was going all right. Now, all the others on stage.

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

Mechanically Kitt's lips and fingers followed the usual routine. Fifty dollars . . . in addition to what they had made this summer? That was how far toward the tuition of the first quarter? There'd be books and extras . . .

Sunny's sharp elbow nudged her. The announcer bear's voice, on stage, cried, "Hey, hey, this isn't your turn! You've been on once already!"

Kitt switched the Persian dancer back to his place on the hanger, brought out G. Washington, whose turn it was to appear. My that was a close call! Mustn't happen again. Smart of Sunny to remind her through the bear, and the audience delightedly took it all as part of the performance.

The first half of the show was over. Humpty Dumpty was soon to make his première. Kitt was sure that the audience must feel the increased tension when they were swept from the old into the new acts. But, amazingly, the new material was even better. Despite the tenseness of forced rehearsals, characters still had a pleasant freshness; Kitt was obliged to throw herself more fully into the part of the poor little Princess Rapunzel waiting forlornly in her high tower, to forget fifty dollars, college fund, Peter French, car thief and missing cases, all in the character of the sneering, revengeful Heh . . . heh . . . heh! of the wicked old witch.

There was a glance of triumph and congratulation from Sunny as Kitt, without a falter, finished her long

SUCCESS

speech in the second act; that speech through which she had stumbled a half dozen times this same afternoon. It didn't need the crash of applause out front for them to know it had registered, that Rapunzel was a success. Still the applause was sweet.

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair." The Prince mounted on the golden silken ladder to the high tower and the little old fairy tale progressed to a finish. The marionettes were marshaled on stage to receive their curtain calls. Footlights went down, house lights on. For the final time, came a burst of enthusiastic applause.

Once again Kitt and Sunny felt that gratitude and applause had grossly overpaid them, felt that aching need to appear out front and say something, do something to balance their account, even that ridiculous feeling that they might give the show all over again in repayment. But white faced and weary, they could only smile, and smile uncertainly, and receive the congratulations that came their way.

"You go along and rest, Kitt. I'll tend to the crowd," whispered Sunny, as always. Kitt nodded agreement, but she didn't want to rest. Not yet. She wanted to find Mr. Fairweather and Peter, hear more about that exciting news of his, and . . . what else was it he had to tell them?

Sunny was already engulfed. A delighted gentleman in evening dress wanted to make the bear walk, ladies in summery gowns begged to hold and handle

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

the golden haired Princess. Sunny shot a glance, half despairing, above the group, but shook her head at Kitt. No, she didn't need help.

Mr. Fairweather was as enthusiastic as the others, which, considering how stale the show must be for him, was a great tribute. Peter French hovered tactfully in the background, but Sunny's father wanted especially to have a talk with the girls, though Sunny, as Kitt explained to him, would be busy for at least another half hour. One could see her tousled halo, getting curlier and wilder every minute, as she reached up to shove in a hairpin, and bobbing above the wave of directors, campers, officials and visitors that surged around the steps of the stage.

Watch in hand, for, as he explained, Peter had volunteered to drive him home to-night, Mr. Fairweather drew Kitt away from the babel of voices. When they had time, later on, he said, he'd like to lay before Kitt-Cat and Company his financial report for the season. But perhaps they'd like to know the high spots of it now, on this closing night of their theatrical season. He launched into a brief summary for Kitt's attentive ear.

"Think you can remember that?" he concluded.

Remember it! Golly, who couldn't? Kitt found it difficult to give Sunny's father a decorous farewell, not just throw her arms around his neck and hug him.

"See you soon again," said Peter, grinning below his carrotty topknot. "Gosh, I'm glad you're not moving



Kitt swung round on her heels, swooping Sunny with her.

SUCCESS

off to college this fall. I've got a year in Liskeard High, remember. I'll need a good sponsor there." And they were gone.

Kitt danced back to the platform, hoping that Sunny would soon be free, but the crowd seemed thicker than ever. Usually Kitt herself would be busy at this hour, packing up for the end of their one-night stand; but, with the repeat performance booked for to-morrow, there wasn't anything to keep her occupied. Perhaps if she also took a marionette to display she could help sweep away this mob.

Twenty minutes later the last teacher and camper melted reluctantly into the night. Mr. Pensilva had repeated his extreme appreciation of their work, and it was all over. Kitt kept a hold on herself until the screen door slammed behind him, then self-restraint could do no more.

"*Yoops!*" was the remark she uttered. And Sunny's reply, which sounded like "*Eeeep!*" was equally enlightening. Marionettes and control were cast aside. Kitt grabbed the astonished Sunny about the waist and swung her down the hall in a wild burst of glee. Chairs folded up, settees went galley-west as they passed; the last need for professional decorum had gone. One could be one's age. And there was news, news, Jerusalem, what news to impart!

"Sunny, old thing, we're coming into riches . . . riches . . . riches!" sang Kitt, whirling the not un-

STRINGS TO ADVENTURE

willing Sunny about like one of her own marionettes.

"I know . . . Kitt . . . I know!" Sunny was at first too intent on her own news to listen. "Six new bookings, entirely new, all out of to-night's work. And those on top of—"

"No, but listen Sunny. This is real. This is velvet. We haven't had to work for this."

Who had let Low Jinks into the hall? Anyway he was there, racing at their heels, ears frantically flopping, mouth wide with a delighted grin.

"The sheriff . . . *whoops*, was that a chair? . . . told your father that there was a three hundred reward for the capture of the car thief. And that he'll split it three ways with us." Kitt swung round on her heels, swooping Sunny with her; Jinks did too flat a turn on the polished floor, scrabbled with his toenails and came a cropper, but was up again, barking wildly.

"Shush, Jinks! Shush, I say. Make him be still, Kitt. What was that? The car thief. Led go . . ." laughing, "you're hurding be!"

Kitt came to a halt and collapsed in a chair, arms dangling limply. "Oh, it's just that we got hold," gasping for breath, "of one end of a gang of silk thieves. They stored . . . oh . . . oh, I'm out of breath! . . . stored the silk in a car there, near where we parked ours, and another member of the gang picked it up each week. That's why there was a reward out."

Sunny, unsteadily on the seat of a chair, was ex-

SUCCESS

ecuting a *pas seul*. "Fifty for not being home. A hundred for the car thief. More in the bank. *What* a show we'll have next year, Kitt!" And a possible sale for Rapunzel, props and all. . . ."

"*What?* . . ."

"Yes, indeedy. And with the dates we've got for next summer . . ."

"The best day's work," beamed Kitt, "we ever did in our lives."

"Day's?" queried Sunny, and shook her head.

No, indeed, not "day's work." Why, Kitt had been working at marionettes since she was twelve, and this summer they'd given all of their vacation to the job and all their spare time for months before. . . .

But Kitt refused to be disenchanted. It was good luck, and lots of it; sheer enchantment to-day had been. Magic. Riches simply handed them on a platter. To be true magic, of course, it should come in threes. . . .

"Saay . . ." drawled Hank's gangling voice from the doorway. "It's most bedtime, ain't it? Did that there li'l dawg get any supper? Maybe he'll eat this." In his hand he bore a well filled plate. Jinks, woofing a thank-you, set upon it.

"There," said Kitt. "What'd I tell you? The third blessing for to-day. And . . . on a platter!"





NOV 16 1935

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00021191310